

スクラップド・プリンセス2

赦されざる者達の騒動歌

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『とどめを刺さなかったあなたが悪いんだよ』
ハルファード
クリスはシャノンに長柄戦斧を打ち込む。

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Prologue

Children could be cruel.

“You’re so pathetic!”

“Get away from me!”

“No one said you could come here!”

Children were supposed to be innocent, but few recognized how innocence could still lead to cruelty. Inflicting pain on others didn’t always begin with conscious malice.

“Go home!”

“I can smell your stink from over here!”

Some forms of misery were only known to those who had been dragged through the mud—a sadness that comes with the experience of being soiled. Those who didn’t know the feeling could be vicious, as they couldn’t understand the pain of the wounded.

“No one wants to be friends with a loser like you!”

Those who were protected by the exemption of childhood had no responsibility for their words. Was it a sin to not know pain? Could one vilify a child, who knew not what he did?

“What’s wrong with her? Is she completely stupid?”

“Don’t look at me like that, ugly!”

But worthy of blame or not, young cruelty still led to pain. The girl on the ground curled up and whimpered.

“What’s wrong?”

Almost instinctively, she kept her eyes low as she glanced up.

“What’s your name?”

She stared, quivering. Her name was known throughout town and closely associated with her shame— an outcast

child, born to a vagrant woman after an affair with a town youth. She didn't want to speak it.

"Do you have any friends?"

It was too much of a bother to even shake her head.

"You don't?" he asked, his expression a peculiar combination of a smile and a pout. It was hard to guess what he thought of the girl, who gave him neither affirmation nor denial. "To tell you the truth, I don't have any friends, either. I just moved here and..."

The boy's sad smile moved her. She tried to respond, but only managed to croak.

Whenever she said anything, someone snapped about the stench of her breath; and whenever she formed an opinion into a sentence, she was labeled impudent. So she'd given up using words. She said nothing more than the bare minimum of what was necessary.

"My health's pretty bad, y'know? So I can't run, and nobody wants to play with the kid who can't run."

He held out a hand to her. The girl blinked and looked at it in surprise.

"Will you play with me?" he asked timidly.

The girl didn't move. The boy's hand was small and frail, but the girl didn't see that. To be offered something she had dreamed of for so long... she thought that tiny hand could cup the world.

The Travelers Arrive

“If I have to tell you *one more time*, you’re sleeping in the wagon until your back and butt turn wagon-seat-shaped!”

Winia, quietly setting a table in the Big Bear Inn, paused for a moment. But only for a moment; her amber eyes didn’t bother trailing to the ceiling, in the direction of the guest rooms. She’d grown accustomed to hearing screaming in the morning. Ignoring it had become part of her routine.

Although they’d haggled for a sizeable discount on the price of their room, there was no denying that they were paying guests. In the off-season, paying guests were scarce—especially for the small and conservative Big Bear Inn. The inn couldn’t afford to house only non-screaming customers.

“What?! If I have to sleep in the wagon, then *you’re* sleeping in the dirt! And then you can eat grass for breakfast and spend half your day sitting in the outhouse!”

Winia rubbed a spot of dirt from the plate in her hand. Taurus was a provincial town in the eastern part of the Linevan Kingdom, one of the one hundred and five holy sites of the kingdom’s official religion of Mauserism. During the pilgrimage season, one could expect a certain level of bustle and festivity, but Taurus was no more than a one-horse town the rest of the year.

But however rural Taurus was, its well-kept roads brought a decent number of merchants, minstrels, and travelers with nothing better to do in the off-season. The Big Bear Inn was one of the few Taurus inns that stayed open year-round and was subjected to whoever felt like passing through.

Like screamers, Winia thought absently.

By the time Winia had finished setting the table for breakfast, the ruckus from above had quieted. She heard a pair of footsteps patting down the stairs.

“Good morning,” came a chirp.

“Good morning,” Winia murmured. She glanced up and saw what she always saw after the screaming tapered off: a tall, lean girl with a cheerful smile on her face.

The girl’s jet-black hair reached halfway down her back, and her midnight eyes glistened. The paleness of her smooth skin and the whiteness of her casual dress contrasted sharply with the dark luster of her hair and eyes. She was not extravagant, but her features were refined, and none would deny that she was beautiful. The only thing that seemed at odds with her beauty was the slightly dazed look she often wore on her face—like a person recently woken.

The guest book listed her as Raquel Casull. Winia stared at her, wondering how to get one’s skin to look so lovely.

“Something wrong?” Raquel asked, tilting her head a bit. Her midnight hair swayed with such elegance that Winia found herself flustered for a moment.

“N-nothing,” Winia muttered, quickly averting her eyes. She noticed her own reflection in a metal serving tray. Stubborn red hair. Freckles, with a dark complexion. Eyes that were peculiarly adult, plain, and amber. She wasn’t necessarily ugly, but she knew she wasn’t beautiful. There was nothing particularly unique or noteworthy about her. In fact, during the seventeen years of her life, not once had she been told she was pretty.

She wondered why God was so unfair.

“It sounds like everyone’s awake in *your* room,” Winia said with a hint of sarcasm.

“Ah. I’m sorry about the noise.”

Winia shrugged. “We don’t have any other guests right now, so you’re not waking anyone up. Grandma and I only care if you break something.”

Winia’s grandmother, the only other caretaker of the inn, spent most of her days bedridden in her room. Winia had

lost both her parents at a young age—young enough that she didn't remember a thing about them.

"I don't have siblings, so I'm curious... do brothers and sisters always fight so often?"

Raquel pursed her lips. "Well," she admitted, "I don't know how it is in other families. Mine is... unusual." She paused.

As if to fill the silence, another pair of footsteps thumped down the stairs. They were accompanied by the sound of something rather large being dragged.

Winia turned. Shannon Casull, very obviously not dressed for the day, yawned as he descended.

"Morning," he mumbled, dragging his bundle down the stairs.

He usually kept his long hair tied back in a ponytail, so seeing it down was a first for Winia. With his dark hair spilling down his back, she could see more clearly that he and Raquel were related.

Winia wondered, not for the first time, why Raquel and Shannon seemed to share nothing more than basic physical qualities. His face was as refined and attractive as Raquel's, but opposed to her soft smiles, he often wore listless expressions. His perpetual exhaustion made him seem quite a bit older than he actually was. Perhaps he had a lot to worry about.

"Good morning," muttered Shannon's captive, dangling from her collar like a misbehaving kitten. Her toes barely reached the hardwood floor as Shannon hauled her alongside him.

Pacifica Casull. Winia had been told she was the youngest of the Casulls, but she saw no resemblance— Pacifica's eyes were sky blue, and her wildly tangled hair, usually tamed into pinned-up braids, gleamed like spun gold. She was in her mid-teens, and although her somewhat small stature made her seem rather cute, her delicate facial features held a hidden elegance. If dressed in a fine gown and sitting

quietly in a corner, she could easily pass as the daughter of the social elite.

But being dragged by the collar, her navel peeking out from under her shirt, wasn't exactly the picture of elegance. And with all the shrieking she did in the morning, Winia couldn't imagine the girl ever sitting quietly.

Winia leveled her gaze at the two siblings. "So the battle's over?" she asked dryly.

Pacifica shrugged and snorted, but her disdain was difficult to take seriously as she dangled in the air. "But not the war," she snapped. "How am I supposed to spend day and night with a geezer who complains about *everything*? 'What a hassle, what a hassle.'" She swung a kick at Shannon and missed. That only made her angrier. "Why don't you just wear a sign on your back that says, 'Life's a pain' and save us all your bellyaching?!"

"Calm down."

"No! I go out of my way to wake you up in the morning like a kind and humble superior, so you release your morning nastiness on *me*? I don't deserve that, you insubordinate jerk!"





“Raquel,” Shannon said in clear distaste. “I think it’s time we ditched the princess.”

“Oh, my.”

“You know what your problem is?!” Pacifica ranted on. “You don’t respect me, Shannon! You don’t understand your position as my subject!”

“You’re the *last* one to talk about not understanding one’s *position*, Pacifica.”

“You... you smell like old socks!”

Winia ignored the rest of their bickering and waited until Raquel fulfilled her daily duty of stepping in to end the fight.

As Winia went off to fetch breakfast, she found herself, as usual, contemplating the Casulls. She had to admit that their family dynamic intrigued her a bit; their odd yet comfortable exchanges were new to Winia. She realized that she would often just sit and watch them for hours on end, and not just because they were her only guests.

The one thing in particular she hadn’t yet figured out was the “master and subject” nicknames. Winia had once wondered if Pacifica might be an incognito noble, traveling with two servants disguised as her siblings... but she had since scrapped that idea. If Shannon actually *was* Pacifica’s subject, Pacifica had no reason whatsoever to keep such a rude employee on her payroll.

“You ate it?! You actually ATE IT?! I can’t believe you, Shannon!”

Winia leaned against a nearby wall as the family ate breakfast. She didn’t really feel like doing chores anyway.

“You *know* that omelets are my favorite! How can you just finish it by yourself without thinking of me?!”

“Because it was on my plate.”

“Shut up! That kind of selfishness, that complete lack of compromise only... um...” She quickly pulled a piece of paper from her sleeve and skimmed it. “It... unfairly distributes the wealth, causing poverty in the lower classes

and need-spurred violence! You're the source of *crime*, Shannon!"

"Did you actually prepare notes for this?"

"I guess my logic's too advanced for a knave like you! In *layman's* terms, don't you think you should share food with your adorable little sister like a decent human being?!"

"No."

"Raquel! Shannon's being mean to me!"

Raquel sighed. "All right, all right... you can have mine, Pacifica. Now dry those tears and stop choking your older brother."

It had been a week since they'd arrived, but Winia still found the Casulls strangely interesting. Was it because she was an only child? Maybe the Casulls were normal, and Winia just didn't know what an average family was like?

Still, she had difficulty believing that when she saw things like Pacifica attacking Shannon with her spoon, and Shannon effortlessly parrying her efforts while drinking his juice.

Several figures stood quietly in the dark. There were four of them... possibly, but it was difficult to tell. They were so nearly identical; it was hard to distinguish them.

Hair, height, clothing—the men's appearances had been stripped of any trace of individuality; standing in a line, they looked like a series of reflections created by two parallel mirrors. Only a close examination of their varying facial features could prove that the figures were flesh and blood.

"Listen, Purgers."

A white light cut across the darkness.

The men—Purgers, with no individual names to distinguish them—turned in a synchronized, precise motion. The light was terribly bright, but the men faced it head-on, their gazes unflinching. They stared expressionlessly at the person who stood inside that light.

"I give you your next mission," the figure said quietly. In the brilliance that surrounded him, only the outline of his

body was visible. He was not just beautiful; the lines that formed his shape were powerful, even elegant.

“In the name of our Lord Mauser, purify the cursed souls.”

The Purgers showed the lit figure no expressions. They stirred slightly, like pulled arrows quivering in aim of a target.

“The cursed soul is known as Pacifica. The Scrapped Princess, Pacifica Casull.”

The men’s faces remained emotionless. They had no response to the order, as they had no response to anything in their lives. They were created to have faith—they lived for faith, died for faith, and considered anything else to be impure. They had the ability to penetrate any obstacle and “purify” an assigned, unquestioned target, but in exchange for this ability, they had given up their humanity.

“Go.”

After bowing in one perfectly coordinated motion, the Purgers vanished. Nothing more than killing machines, the only thing that remained human about them was their appearance. They showed neither hesitation nor curiosity.

Even if, on the shadow behind the figure before them, lay the outline of a mammoth pair of wings.

“Winia! Hey, Winia!”

Winia looked up from the stack of towels in her hands. Pacifica bounded catlike across the room and tugged playfully at Winia’s apron.

“Let’s go out on the town!” the younger girl exclaimed. “You can show me the best tourist spots, right? And I want to see all your favorite stores!”

“What? Oh, but I have to...” Winia hesitated. Even at her small inn there were many chores to be done; before the day ended she knew she had to wash the sheets and curtains, prepare dinner, and do a few minor repair jobs. But

more than that, Winia was surprised that someone she barely knew would take such an enthusiastic interest in her.

It wasn't that she didn't like people. It was just that during the seventeen years she'd been alive, she'd learned that things were much easier if she kept others at a distance.

Pacifica must have noticed her discomfort, because she backed off.

"I'm sorry. I'm being too pushy." The girl smiled apologetically. "I didn't think of your schedule."

Winia blinked. She hadn't expected the change in attitude—her impression of Pacifica was based entirely on the obnoxious way she treated her brother. It made Winia feel guilty for rejecting her.

"No, I'm sorry. I mean, I wish I could show you around, but the season's changing soon and I need to pull the sheets and curtains and do all the laundry. I just don't have the time."

"Oh?" Pacifica asked, her smile turning sly. "Well, you can leave all that for someone else to do."

"Someone else?"

Pacifica pointed across the room at Shannon, who had just looked up from his meal to see what she was talking about.

He choked on his tea.

"A-are you serious?" Shannon managed to splutter. "You're actually telling me to do laundry?"

"Yup." Pacifica seemed to be enjoying herself immensely.

"You can't... you must be... argh!" Shannon ranted. Angrily, he folded his arms and looked to the wall.

"There's no way I'm gonna get out of this, is there?" he asked after a moment.

"Nope!"

He sighed. "Fine," he muttered. "Just take Raquel with you so she can't try to help me."

"You really don't have to—" Winia tried to protest, but Pacifica had already run gleefully past her and up the stairs.

“I guess I’ll start with the laundry. The sheets, curtains, and pillowcases need to be done, right?” Shannon turned his dark eyes to Winia. “You can show me how to make up the rooms when you get back.”

Winia paled slightly. “I-I can’t have you do that,” she murmured. “You’re a guest.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not worth arguing with Pacifica when she’s like this—it could take hours, and I’d still end up doing laundry.” He gave the girl a half smile. “Besides, I should probably work off that discount you gave us.”

Winia frowned. “Well... all right. And we’ll, um, take Raquel with us?”

Shannon grimaced. “Yeah. I’d rather we didn’t blow up your inn.”

Winia figured it was better not to ask.

The main street of the city of Taurus was lined with interesting shops. Pacifica, Winia, and Raquel had gravitated toward one of the biggest: a general store that advertised itself as the largest in town. The walls were lined with everything from household goods to souvenirs. Years ago it would have been strange to find such a large store outside of the capital, but the recent years of peace and prosperity had been good for trade.

“Ooh!”

Raquel’s hand shot out to grab something off the shelf—something that turned out to be a poorly made kitten doll in a mug.

“Isn’t this just the most adorable thing you’ve ever seen?” Raquel cooed as she thrust the grotesque cat at Pacifica and Winia. Before either of them could respond, she’d moved on to another shelf.

“It’s so pretty!” she exclaimed as she wrapped a yellow scarf around her head and inspected her reflection. Her attention fell on something shiny and she was off again,

inspecting a shelf of porcelain figurines with squeals of delight.

“Um... is this normal?” Winia whispered to Pacifica. She tried not to sound as disturbed as she felt.

“Pretty much,” Pacifica replied. “Raquel loves crap like this.” She looked over at her sister, who had frantically begun digging through a box of assorted knick-knacks. “I think she’s gonna be awhile. Let’s go outside.”

Winia nodded. Pacifica yelled goodbye to Raquel as they left, and Raquel waved a dismissive hand as the two younger girls headed out.

A fruit juice stand stood across the street from the store. Pacifica gave it a measuring glance, and the vendor seemed to notice.

“Young lady!” he called with a welcoming smile. “I haven’t seen you around here before.”

Pacifica beamed. She practically skipped up to the vendor; Winia was starting to think the younger girl thrived on any sort of attention.

“I’m just passing through, sir. I figured I’d take the day and see the sights.” Pacifica smiled charmingly at the man, then made a show of looking over the list of flavors. “Wow, these all sound really good. My friend and I will have whatever you recommend.”

“Why, everything I sell is good!” the man said with a laugh.

Winia felt a pang of jealousy as Pacifica bantered with the juice seller. She’d lived in that town for years and had passed that stall a hundred times, but she wouldn’t feel comfortable exchanging more than a few words with the man. Yet Pacifica, who’d barely been in town a week, could effortlessly treat a perfect stranger like he was an old friend.

The man handed Pacifica two cups of fresh apple juice, each with a large dollop of cream. “A little something extra

for the young lady,” he said with a wink. “Be sure to stop by next time you’re in town!”

Pacifica thanked him, then made her way to a nearby bench. Winia sat down beside her and looked into her cup.

“So my sister’s weird, isn’t she?”

Winia blinked. She looked up from the murky depths of thick cream and apple juice.

“What was that?” she asked.

“She seems really mature until she opens her mouth,” Pacifica explained. The girl’s eyes were locked on the shop across the street, where a silhouette in the window that looked suspiciously like Raquel waved its arms excitedly and knocked something off a shelf.

The exact same thing could be said of Pacifica, but Winia thought pointing that out would be extremely rude. She made a noncommittal noise and took a sip of her juice instead.

“I think it’s nice,” Winia said after a moment. “It’s nice that little things can make her happy.”

Pacifica shrugged. “Well, she’s always really liked collecting stuff. Back home, her room was so full of random junk that there was barely room for her bed. She loved all of it, too. She’d come home with a shiny rock or a cheap figurine and treat it like it was made of gold.”

Pacifica smiled at the memory. Then, slowly, the smile melted from her face.

Winia frowned in confusion. *What’s wrong with her?* she wondered.

Pacifica cleared her throat. “You know,” she murmured after a moment, “when we set out on our travels, Raquel had to get rid of all her stuff. So I guess I can’t blame her for getting excited.” She looked down into her juice, her gaze oddly distant.

Curiosity got the better of Winia. “Um, Pacifica?” she began tentatively. “I was wondering... why *are* you and your siblings traveling?” She’d already noticed that they didn’t

act like tourists, and they didn't seem to be in any particular hurry. They'd been in town for an entire week and hadn't done much of anything.

Pacifica looked up. "Do you really want to know?" she asked, more seriously than Winia had expected.

"I-I don't mean to pry," she quickly explained. "It's just... it's habit for me to try to get to know my guests' backgrounds. At an inn like mine, we tend to have guests who are running away from something."

Naturally after hearing this, Pacifica's demeanor changed, which only heightened Winia's curiosity.

"Like debt collectors," Winia offered. "Some people leave home because they can't pay their debts. They stay at my inn because they think they can take advantage of me and leave without paying." As she suddenly realized what she was saying, Winia turned bright red. "Not that I think you're one of those people!" she quickly added. "I mean, you paid in advance, anyway."

"No, I know what you mean. It must be tough running a place like that."

"I'm used to it."

"I can see why you'd want to know your guests' backgrounds."

"But... I don't want to meddle in your private affairs. It was rude of me to ask."

Pacifica flashed Winia a mischievous grin. "If you stop acting like I'm gonna bite your head off," she murmured, "then maybe I'll tell you."

"I-I don't know what you mean," Winia stammered.

Winia hadn't always been so antisocial. She could remember a time when she'd been able to open herself up to another person, even if only a little. But it had been a long time ago . . . and he had gone away, leaving her behind.

Trusting others was too painful. Winia wasn't sure she ever wanted to try it again.

“Well?” Pacifica was still smiling, but her expression had softened. “What’s it gonna be, Winia?”

Looking into Pacifica’s clear gaze, Winia felt her resolve weakening. She hesitated a moment.

Finally, she swallowed. “Okay,” she said quietly. “I’d, um... like to hear your story, Pacifica.”

A very thin layer of some invisible weight seemed to lift off Winia’s shoulders. She smiled clumsily at her achievement.

That wasn’t so bad, she thought.

Pacifica took a long drink of juice before wiping her ‘ mouth with her hand. “It’s a long story,” she admitted. “But the reason we left home is... well, it’s because of me.”

Winia looked at her quizzically. “What do you mean by that?”

“It’s better if I don’t stay in one place for too long.” Pacifica spoke casually, even though a mature edge nipped at the tone in her voice.

Winia wondered what Pacifica could have done to be forced out of her home. Most people, particularly those who lived far from the big cities, spent their entire lives in their birth towns. Few businesses hired strangers, and the areas between towns were filled with dangerous wilderness and bandits. In some of the more isolated towns, banishment was equivalent to a death sentence.

“It’s my fault that we lost everything,” Pacifica continued quietly. “Raquel and Shannon lost their friends and their home... and it was all because of me.”

Winia frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Well...” Pacifica paused, as if unsure of what to say next.

“The reason,” a voice declared from behind them, “is because your very existence is forbidden.”

The two girls whipped around. Four men stood nearby, their still, dark forms a marked contrast from the pleasant bustle of the busy street.

The four men all wore short hair and gray overcoats. Although their facial features were dissimilar, each had the same blank expression and stood in the same stiff manner. Something about them was almost puppet-like, lined up as if some outside force had put them there.

The four men started toward Pacifica. They walked completely in unison, and in one coordinated motion pulled something metallic out of their pockets.

“Winia,” Pacifica whispered. “Run away. Now.”

She sounded nervous, but Winia was surprised she didn’t hear any hesitation in Pacifica’s voice. Whoever these people were, she was expecting them.

“Wh-what?” Winia stuttered. “What’s going on?”

The men moved slowly through the crowd. No one but Pacifica and Winia seemed to notice them.

“Hurry!” Pacifica insisted, pushing Winia toward the road. “If you run, they won’t follow you. Don’t stay here and get hurt!”

“But—”

The objects in the men’s hands glistened in the sunlight. Winia could see them more clearly now: weapons, all of them, shaped like two bound metal crescents, sharpened and deadly.

“Purge.” It was impossible to tell which man had spoken, but all four of them raised their blades.

“No!” Winia’s confusion turned to fear, but she could not run. She couldn’t leave Pacifica. “No! G-go away!”

The blades flew through the air. Winia covered her head and screamed.

“Wall, defend!”

A group of shining geometric patterns shielded the girls; the weapons’ curved blades cracked against the barrier and clattered to the ground.

The surrounding townspeople, finally noticing the face-off, dispersed.

In the doorway stood a tall sorcerer, her raven hair swept back by the wind, her arm outstretched in a powerful stance. Unfortunately, her dazed smile and the overflowing shopping bags seemed to minimize the impact of the image.

“Raquel!” Pacifica cried in relief.

“What do you want with my sister?” Raquel called. Her tone was calm, almost amused. “You’re Purgers; am I right?”

The men simply reached into their pockets and drew four more curved blades.

Raquel didn’t give them the chance to attack again. Her hand still outstretched, she immediately cast a spell.

“People of the flames, dance!”

A huge explosion rocked the street. The people who hadn’t yet left the area screamed and dove for cover. A thick blanket of dust and smoke filled the air, blinding Winia and causing her to double over in a coughing fit.

“Pacifica!” an urgent voice whispered nearby. “Winia!” A moment later, Raquel appeared out of the smoke.

Winia choked down the thick air and blinked her watery eyes. Pacifica appeared from another direction, her face lighting up when she saw her sister.

“Do you think you got them?” Pacifica asked.

“It would take a lot more than that to defeat the Purgers.” Raquel pondered something for a moment, then glanced back in the direction of her enemies. Her lips pursed and she almost frowned.

“I’ve never fought one before. If what I’ve heard is true, I’m no match for them. We should go back to Shannon.”

Pacifica nodded. She and Raquel began to run, practically dragging Winia behind them.

“I can’t believe this,” Shannon complained for the twentieth or thirtieth time that afternoon.

He knelt next to the inn’s washing basin, his arms soaked to the elbows in soapy water. He’d managed to get most of

the washing done in a timely fashion, but that didn't make him feel much better. He rubbed more soap into the sheet in his hands.

"What is this, gravy? Who gets this stuff on their sheets? Dammit, it's not coming out," he muttered to himself as he scrubbed the offending sheet, completely absorbed in the task.

At least Raquel had agreed to go with the girls and therefore couldn't offer "helpful" suggestions for the tough stains he encountered. He very much admired his sister's capacity for magic, but she had a tendency to rely on it even for the most menial of tasks.

Shannon shuddered. Raquel knew too many fire spells to try and apply magic to housework.

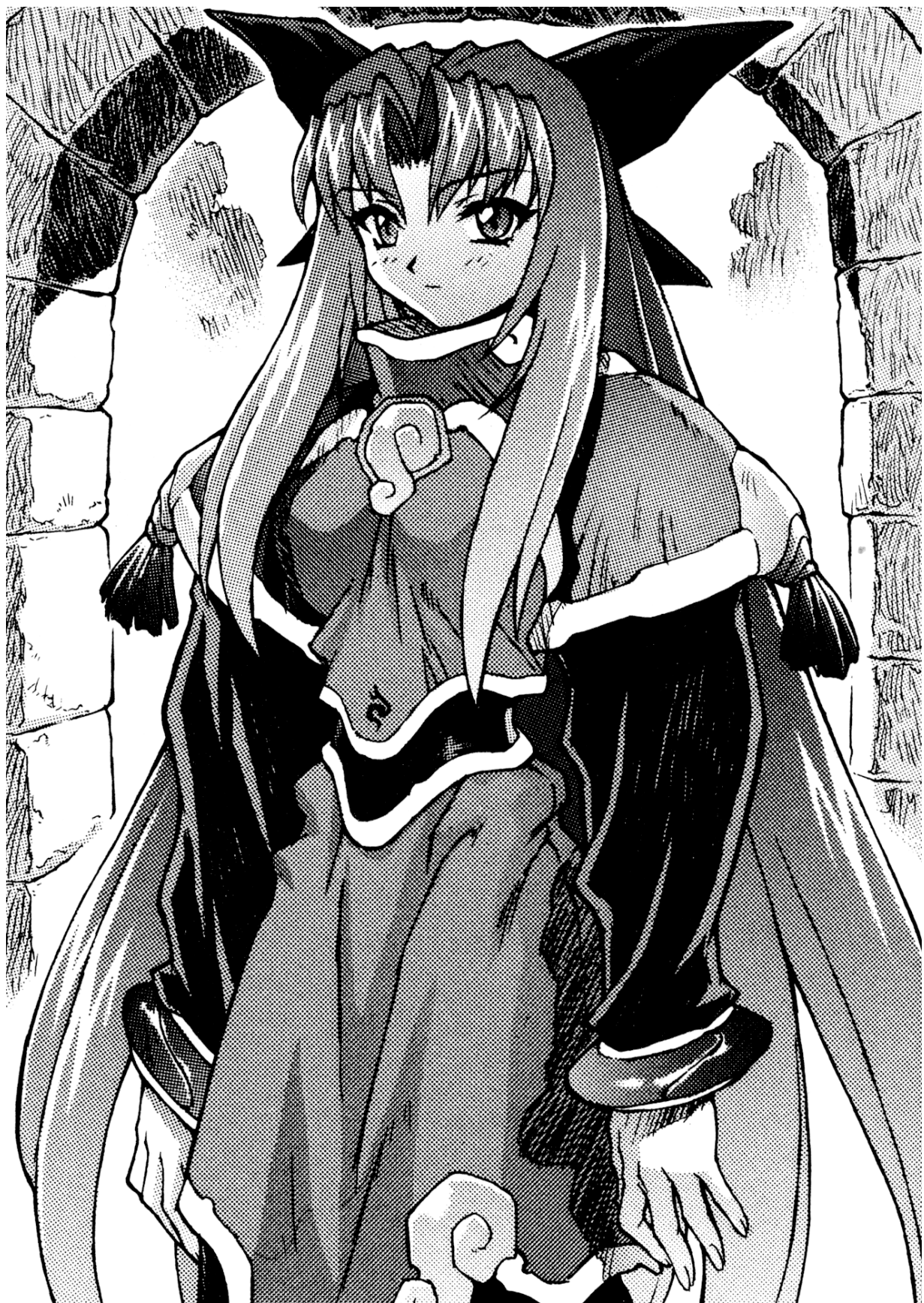
"You'd make a fine housewife," someone commented from behind him.

"Don't start," Shannon muttered without turning around.

Shannon was very careful to contain his surprise. He hadn't even sensed that anyone was there, but he doubted it was an enemy, since anyone who could sneak up behind him wouldn't announce their presence prior to killing him. But he wasn't about to risk his life on that assumption. He rose and turned cautiously, his hand barely tilted toward the hilt of his sword.

"What the...?"

Standing across the room was a young, beautiful girl. She seemed no older than ten years old, but her poised stance belied her youthful appearance. Her blue hair, tied in a purple ribbon, reached all the way to her feet, and her amethyst eyes stared off into infinity.





“Shannon Casull,” the girl intoned. “One of the Casull Guardian siblings. I wondered what you would be like.” Although her expression didn’t change, Shannon thought he saw a flicker of life in her eyes as she added, “My predictions never included the apron.”

Shannon scowled.

“Don’t be angry,” the girl said. “It almost suits you. You’re more attractive than I’d expected.”

Shannon quickly pulled off the offending garment and gave the girl a calculating look. After a moment, he murmured, “What’s with the little-girl facade?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re right in front of me, but I don’t feel your presence at all. I don’t know if you were created by optic phantom magic or psychological illusion magic, but you’re just an image. You could look like anything.”

The image shrugged its shoulders. “You’re right,” she consented. “This appearance was chosen for me. But that’s not important now.” She leveled her empty gaze at Shannon. “I came here today to warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“A new group of assassins sent by the Mauser Church is approaching. Your sister was attacked just a few moments ago.”

Shannon’s eyes stayed locked on the girl.

“You don’t seem concerned,” she commented. “Aren’t you worried about your sister?”

“No—Raquel’s with her. If Pacifica had been killed, Raquel would’ve burned this town to ashes.” He furrowed his eyebrows. “I don’t suppose you’ll tell me who or what you are, will you?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Shannon Casull, I know you have no reason to trust me, but I’m on your side.” The girl paused for a moment as if in thought. “I will tell you my name, though. You can call me Arfi.”

“...Arfi?”

"It's short for something. Don't forget it."

With that, the girl's image wavered before shattering into tiny fragments. The remaining pieces then vanished into thin air.

Shannon scratched the back of his head in confusion and looked back to his washbasin. Now, the notion of continuing the chore was even more ridiculous than it was before.

Man, he thought. *What the hell was that all about?*

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of his sisters arriving downstairs.

Winia stood to one side as Shannon, Raquel, and Pacifica hurriedly packed their belongings. She was amazed at how quickly their room could be packed up; they'd obviously done this before.

Winia's heart tore at the sight. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to live on the run, never making friends or even finding a place to call home.

"I'm sorry I got you involved in this mess," Pacifica sighed as she shoved her last bundle of clothes in a large sack. "I know it was stupid, but I kept thinking about how nice it would be to settle down and live a normal life here. I know I was just kidding myself, but..." She trailed off, her eyes downcast.

Winia frowned. "Pacifica..."

"But don't worry. Once we're gone, you won't be in any more danger, Winia." Pacifica tilted her head up, her face contorted into an imitation of her old smile.

Winia hesitated. Escaping those men in town had been a terrifying experience. But now a similar panic gripped her as she realized she'd never see her friend again. Pacifica would walk out the door, and nothing would remain except insubstantial memories.

The last few days had been some of the best Winia could remember. After so many years of closing herself off, she had actually let herself think that she could have real

friends, people who cared for her and whom she could care for in return. She couldn't bear to have them taken away so soon.

"Um... I..."

Winia tried to think of something to say, anything that might keep the Casulls from leaving. But her words failed her like they always did.

Shannon suddenly looked up from his packing.

"Dammit." He turned to Raquel. "They're here. Take Pacifica and Winia and hide them in the kitchen." He grabbed his sword and flew out of the room.

A moment later, the sound of shattering glass rang through the Big Bear Inn.

The four Purgers landed in the dining room amid fragments of the broken window. Immediately, they spotted Shannon by the far wall, and in one motion threw their curved blades.

The four speeding blades were impossible to block with a single sword. Shannon yanked a linen tablecloth from a nearby table and swung it in front of him. The cloth intercepted the blades, knocking them down to the ground.

"Great," he muttered. "I just washed that." He tossed the tablecloth aside as the Purgers moved in for another attack.

The four men surrounded Shannon in a semicircle, each with two more blades in their hands. Shannon recognized the weapons as double moon blades, a type of weapon favored by assassins since they were useful for both close combat and long-range attacks. Although their close range was far less than that of Shannon's sword, the inn's small quarters turned this flaw into an advantage—Shannon didn't have enough room to swing his sword properly, but the Purgers could do substantial damage by simply holding a blade and punching him.

The four men attacked simultaneously. Shannon twisted awkwardly and managed to either avoid or block most of

the attacks, that is, except one. A blade skimmed his face, leaving a bleeding gash in its wake.

“Dammit...” Shannon staggered, dodging a blow while thwarting two more with his sword. The four men all had the same attack style, the same accuracy, and even the same power behind their blows. The attacks were becoming predictable, but he couldn’t keep up when they came from all four directions. He gritted his teeth in frustration.

“So this is... what Purgers are like,” Shannon panted between parries. “Boring... and cheap.”

As the attacks continued ceaselessly, Shannon lost track of his minor injuries. He overshot a dodge and mistimed a duck. None of the wounds were serious, but he worried about his endurance. He couldn’t continue to dodge indefinitely, and the loss of blood would begin to weaken him.

Now what? he wondered as the four men blurred in his eyes.

Winia choked back a scream as she watched the fight from a tiny gap in the kitchen door. Shannon staggered backward, his clothes stained scarlet.

As the Purgers closed in around him, they began to speak in a low chant. It sounded almost like a religious ceremony.

“We, who have become one...”

“...who have forged absolute bonds through faith.”

“We dedicate this man’s death...”

“...to our all-powerful Lord Mauser.”

In a moment of terror, the Purgers’ words pierced Winia’s heart.

An absolute bond.

A bond that no one could break.

A relationship without betrayal, without loneliness, without despair...

Winia exhaled desperately. The sight of those men having complete faith in each other almost made her jealous. A

twisted longing pulled in her chest.

"You call... that a bond?"

Shannon's voice rose, overwhelming the conflicting feelings within Winia. With blood rushing in her ears, Winia focused back on him.

Shannon's steps were shaky, but his gaze was hard. He spat blood and glared at the Purgers before him.

"You don't know anything," he growled. He seemed to somehow get better as he spoke, as though drawing strength from some untapped reserve. "You may act the same and read each other's thoughts... but you have no idea what makes a *real* connection!"

Winia froze. Gazing at Shannon's severe profile, Winia had the mistaken impression that his words were aimed at her. She shrank back and trembled.

Shannon suddenly charged the nearest Purger. The man managed to block Shannon's sword, but couldn't stop Shannon's momentum—Shannon slammed the Purger against the wall, knocking him senseless.

The move left Shannon's back wide open. The three remaining Purgers lunged for a final blow.

"Now you're hers!" Shannon shouted as he suddenly dropped to the floor. The Purgers swung their blades in vain as Shannon rolled clear.

That was when Raquel's voice rang out from the kitchen.

"Lightning hammer, strike!"

The spell she'd been preparing burst through the wall, slamming squarely into the assassins.

Pacifica shoved her last bag in the back of the carriage. She dusted her hands and sent Winia a faint smile.

"Thanks for everything this week," she said, a quiet sadness lingering in her voice. "I really had a lot of fun."

Winia swallowed hard as Pacifica gripped the side of the couch to climb in. Her mind clung onto the image of Pacifica,

trying to preserve it as a memory... but Winia didn't want it to be a memory. Not yet.

She had to do something.

Don't let them go! You can't let them get away!

It had been a long week for Winia, and she felt as if she were changing. She was ready to do things she'd never dared to do before.

"W-wait," Winia blurted out.

The three siblings turned to her. They blinked when Winia made a sudden, manic grin.

"You don't think I'll really just let you go now, do you?" Winia clenched her shaking fists in odd determination.

"Um..." Shannon looked taken aback. "If we stay, we'll just bring more trouble to your town. We have to go before —"

"You can't just leave this mess!" Winia gestured toward what was left of her inn.

Raquel's final attack spell had blown not only through the kitchen wall, but also straight through to the outside; the entire section of the structure had nearly collapsed.

"W-we're really sorry, but—"

"You have to pay for this, Mister Casull. The Big Bear Inn can't open for business in this shape."

"...We don't really have the money for—"

"If you don't have enough, you can get a job to save up. I won't let you leave until you pay this off!"

"But the assassins—"

"No excuses!" Winia thrust out a fist. "This inn is my livelihood. If you leave it like this, it will kill me."

The three siblings stared at her, obviously stunned by her outburst.

"Winia," Shannon managed to say. "This isn't a good idea."

"You can stay here until you pay me back, and I'll only charge you actual expenses. Get a job and earn enough to pay for the repairs. Do you understand?"

“But...”

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND?!”

“...Yes.”

The three siblings hung their heads.

And that was how Shannon, Raquel, and Pacifica came to stay in the town of Taurus a little longer than expected.

Beauty and the Beast

Ever since mankind had chosen to wear the cloak of civilization and walk a different path than beast, a gap had existed between the rich and the poor. No society could dole out resources in complete fairness—although all humans were supposedly equal, the same could not be said for their circumstances.

Such an argument, however, did little to console the poor. Just as wealth generally beget wealth, poverty could become an endless and unbearable cycle. But despite the frustration of the underprivileged, life had to go on. The poor had to toil for their survival and exchange their dignity for their bread. The long history of poverty had dictated that the vilest of professions—the most immoral of choices—was often left to those in need.

Beautiful girls in particular could be exploited in their desperation.

“Um...” Raquel looked down at her body, a frown curling her lips. “Is this really, um... what you want from me?”

She wore a white waitress apron, its ends tied firmly behind her waist. The words “Boland’s Bakery” were embroidered over her chest.

“You look perfect.” Michelle Boland smiled broadly and clapped her hands together. “Now let’s get going— warm bread waits for no one!”

Since settling in Taurus a few days earlier, Shannon and his sisters had scoured the town for work. With the substantial repair bill for the Big Bear Inn looming over them, they hoped to pay their dues and leave before more assassins could attack the locals. But Taurus was a rural town, one with no particular industry to speak of, and it was difficult for strangers to find a day’s

wage. Raquel had been accepted for a few housekeeping and babysitting jobs. Shannon had had no choice but to cook and clean at the Big Bear Inn, or sit on the main street with a sign that read: “Will Sharpen Knives.”

Pacifica had declared, “I’m a dependent!” before wandering away.

Eventually, a local establishment known as Boland’s Bakery—a place that did a fair amount of business with the Big Bear Inn—approached the Casulls with a job opportunity.

“Basically,” Michelle explained as she arranged small buns on an outdoor table, “we’re launching a new product.” She brushed a strand of short chestnut-colored hair behind her ear before glancing up with a grin. She was seventeen, just like Winia.

“My father’s really proud of the new line, so we wanted to do something special for a promotion. And he was hoping for some beautiful young woman,” she smiled at Raquel, “to help out.”

“Oh.” Raquel tugged at her skirt, smoothing out the final wrinkles. “And why is that?”

“It’s all part of the marketing strategy.” Michelle dramatically boxed the sky with her hands. “We call it, ‘Boland’s New Buns—Bittersweet, Like First Love.’”

Shannon tried not to roll his eyes, but he failed.

“Bittersweet?”

Michelle handed him one. “Yeah. They’re better than you’d think.”

Shannon stared at the bun in his hand, then at his apron-donning sister. “Whatever,” he muttered. “Good luck, Raquel.”

Boland’s Bakery, which was located on the main street in town, had a charming storefront. However, brightly colored banners, a table draped in a glitzy tablecloth, and a stack of gaudy flyers Michelle and Shannon had made, sharply contrasted its inherent charm. Raquel stood in front of the spectacle with a tray of bread and her usual lax smile.

“Welcome to Boland’s Bakery!” she called to each passerby on the street. “Would you like to try our new product? It’s probably really good.”

Most of the people she called to—especially the males—came over to try a bun. Possibly because the bread was delicious (or the bakery’s tacky decorations warranted a closer look), the locals on the street began to take interest in Raquel. Before long, a crowd had formed around her.

“May I have one?” a young man asked.

“I’ll take two,” called another.

“Bittersweet,” an older man commented as he tasted the bread. “Almost like... first love.”

Still, most of the men seemed more interested in Raquel than in whatever she peddled. She earned more than a few dopey grins from the guys as she flashed her smile.

“Isn’t this a bit much?” Shannon complained. “I mean, I can’t imagine a countryside bakery needs a promotional event.”

Michelle clucked her tongue, her black eyes glittering with purpose. “No matter what your location or ware, it’s not easy to succeed in business. You’re soft, Shannon. Approximately 2.5 times softer than our cream puffs.”

He stared at her. “Did you just use decimals after the word *approximately*?”

Michelle punched him lightly on the shoulder, but otherwise ignored his comment.

“There are four bakeries in Taurus. And we have a rivalry with Kunan’s Bakery that we take very seriously.” She shook her head gravely. “I hate the guy who runs it. He doesn’t get along with my father, and he calls me ‘little girl.’ We’ll show *him* who can be top bun in this town!”

“A baker’s life is a hard one,” Shannon commented without the barest hint of sincerity.

“Well, I’m just glad we found Raquel to help us out. She’s exactly what we were looking for.”

“Why? You’re a young lady, and I’m sure people like you.”

Michelle shook her head. “We really wanted to catch people’s attention. It’s much easier to get noticed if we have a mysterious beauty from out of town.”

“Mysterious?” Shannon glanced at his twin sister. Raquel smiled brightly as she handed out buns to the growing crowd, her face calm and pleasant. Shannon’s own reflection peeked at him from the shop window; his image betrayed a slouchy, unhappy young man.

Shannon sighed. He and Raquel spent almost all of their time together, but he still had trouble understanding her. Not only could he rarely tell what she was thinking, but he had no idea how she could stay so relaxed throughout the day.

“I guess ‘mysterious’ is one way to put it,” he murmured. “But I’m not complaining—we need the money, and I’m sick of doing dishes.” He glanced around.

“Actually,” he said after a moment. “I’ve been meaning to ask you—have you seen my kid sister today?”

Michelle stopped to think. “Pacifica?” she asked. “No. Why?”

Because she has a tendency to almost get killed, he wanted to say, but refrained. Winia had said earlier that Pacifica had gone out “to meet someone,” and that made Shannon particularly uncomfortable.

“You really dote on her,” Michelle noticed, a sly smile on her face. “Is that clinginess I sense, Big Brother?”

Shannon brushed the comment off. “It probably looks that way.”

Michelle chuckled. “There’s no reason to be embarrassed, Shannon. I think it’s cute! Just keep in mind that she’s fifteen now and she’s old enough to have a boyfriend.” She raised an eyebrow. “Don’t get in her way when she’s ready for that, all right?”

“Anybody who wants to court that girl would have to be either a masochist or the most patient person on

the planet.” Shannon ran a hand through his hair.
“Anyway, I’ve done my part here. I’m going to look for...”
He trailed off, distracted, as the crowd around Boland’s Bakery suddenly began to part.

What the hell is that?

A chunky green figure sauntered through the mob. It looked like a living creature... in a way, but its shape was exaggerated. It had short arms and legs and a tuft of something bushy on its head, although whether or not the tuft was supposed to be hair or the crown of a rooster was anyone’s guess. Shannon thought he was going crazy until he realized the creature was a costume.

The rest of the crowd seemed as perplexed as Shannon, since most people scurried to get out of the creature’s way. The few who looked closer in morbid fascination pointed to the creature’s small horns and short tail.

“Is that... an alligator?” someone ventured.

“Far from it,” answered a voice.

Shannon tore his eyes away from the green monstrosity and looked to the middle-aged man beside it. He was short and plump, with thinning hair and a big smile. The words: “Kunan’s Bakery” lettered on his shirt left little doubt regarding his identity.

“This,” he declared, patting the green beast on the shoulder, “is a dragon of old!”

“A *dragon*?” repeated the crowd.

A dragon. The most powerful of the legendary beasts, said to have fought with the strength of God in the War of Creation.

Shannon grimaced. Many artists and poets had tried to describe what the great mythical beast had looked like, but it was up to interpretation. And Kunan’s version had taken some major liberties.

“Isn’t he cute?” Kunan commented. “My bakery’s going to have a new line of products based on little Soupy here. Soupy cream, Soupy chocolate twists, Soupy danishes! He’s

going to be such a hit with children that we'll finally be able to open a branch store in the capital. Ha ha ha!"

Kunan reached into a sack and pulled out a bun that looked like Soupy. It was a carefully prepared pastry, probably filled with cream or some sort of jelly.

Michelle, her eyes wide, thrust a finger at Kunan. "That's treachery!" she cried, although her voice shook.

Shannon couldn't believe it. *Is she actually panicking?* he wondered. *Over competition from a mutated baby alligator?*

"Have you no pride?!" Michelle demanded. "If you want to compete with us, do it with your product! Don't try and get ahead with cheap marketing tricks!"

Shannon was about to mention the irony of the comment when Raquel, his point personified, let out a deep, affected gasp.

"He's so *cute*," she breathed, her hands clasped together as if in prayer.

Shannon slapped a hand to his forehead.

"Hey!" Michelle exclaimed as Raquel wandered dreamily toward the beast. "Where are you going? Raquel!"

The men in the crowd looked dreamily at Raquel. The passion in her eyes had a powerful effect on her male admirers.

Michelle tried to grab Raquel as she lunged for Soupy. "You work for me, Raquel!" Michelle cried. "Stay away from that thing!"

Unfortunately, Michelle's protests didn't stop Raquel. Instead, she just drug Michelle along.

Kunan gave another one of his impressive belly laughs. "Ha ha ha! And you doubted the attraction of my adorable little Soupy!"

Admittedly, Raquel wasn't the only one intrigued—the women and children in the crowd seemed to have taken quite a liking to Soupy. Every time he waved his stubby arms, the crowd broke out into laughter and cheers.

“Grrrr!” Michelle growled as she clung to Raquel’s back. “That’s it! We’re gonna find out who really *can* sell more! I declare a battle of the mascots!”

Raquel suddenly let out a tragic scream and looked at Michelle with wide, pained eyes.

“I have to battle Soupy?”

“That’s right.”

“But that’s so... so...” She clearly struggled with the concept for a moment.

Shannon felt his blood run cold. *Uh-oh.*

Raquel’s natural decisiveness seemed to eventually take effect, because she gripped her fist after a moment and nodded solemnly.

“Then it must be done,” she intoned.

Shannon stepped in front of her, making sure he stood between his sister and Soupy. “Raquel,” he said slowly, “it’s not the kind of battle you’re thinking of.”

Raquel shook her head. “Alas, I already know our path is covered in blood—”

“No blood, Raquel.”

“If the enemy has to be destroyed—”

“No *destruction*, Raquel.” Shannon quickly pushed down her hands, which she’d raised as if preparing for a combat spell. “They just want to see who can sell more bread.”

Raquel blinked, the determination vanishing from her eyes.

Michelle, clearly disturbed by Raquel’s interpretation of the word *battle*, swallowed. “Yeah,” she agreed. “What were you just... trying to do?”

Shannon glanced over at Soupy, who had retreated at Raquel’s insistence to draw his blood.

“Seriously,” Shannon murmured under his breath. “Who the heck would agree to wear that stupid costume?”

Unfortunately, Soupy seemed to hear him. The mythical dragon looked hurt.

Winia's grandmother felt unusually well that day, so Winia left the Big Bear Inn in her care, while Winia went to check up on the Casulls' new jobs.

Truth be told, she was a bit concerned. The Big Bear Inn baked most of its own bread, but in the rare instances that it served fancy pastries, it bought them from Boland's Bakery. Winia had become an acquaintance of Michelle Boland through those occasional dealings; she'd heard the story of how Boland's Bakery had been forced to move to Taurus from a bigger town after a crooked employee had robbed the establishment blind.

Michelle was a city-bred girl and seemed to find life in Taurus boring, which led to her bad habit of creating giant scenes out of tiny issues. And with the Casull siblings' in her employment... well, Winia was a bit concerned. So when she found an abnormally large crowd gathered in front of Boland's Bakery, she pushed her way in. While she was maneuvering between two middle-aged women, a single voice floated in the air above the others.

"Number Eight: little Soupy does a forward roll!"

The two women cheered, along with most of the other women and children in the audience. Winia looked up to see someone in an incredibly awkward big-headed alligator costume, roll across a platform, fail to get up, and wave its stubby arms in frustration. The crowd ate it up.

"Wow, he's so *cute*!"

"Good effort there, Soupy!"

"I love you, Soupy!"

Winia watched as the mob cooed and clapped when the creature fought to its feet. She didn't think the thing was cute... she honestly found it a little disturbing.

"What's going on?" she wondered aloud. "And what the heck's a 'Soupy'?"

"*The* Soupy, really. I sure hope he's one of a kind."

Winia turned. Shannon stood beside her, his arms folded and a slightly-more-exhausted-than-usual expression on his

face.

“Oh. Hi.” Winia tugged on her skirt, which was wrinkled from the crowd. “Wasn’t Raquel supposed to be with you?”

“Number Nine: Raquel will sweep her hair sensuously over her shoulder!”

Raquel walked out to the edge of the platform, cleared her throat politely, and provocatively swept her hair over her shoulder. The male members of the audience whooped and cheered. Raquel, clearly seeking approval, looked back at Michelle who gave Raquel a thumbs-up and a pleased grin.

“Um...” Winia furrowed her eyebrows at Shannon. “What the heck is going on here?”

Shannon just sighed.

“Number Ten: Soupy dances!”

“Number Eleven: Raquel bends over slightly!”

“Number Twelve: Soupy spins around until he falls over!”

“Grrr, that’s a good one. In that case, Number Thirteen: Raquel gets naked!”

The men in the crowd exploded in delirium. Raquel, obviously too caught up in the moment to think clearly, reached for her clothes. She abruptly stopped, turned, and sent Michelle a disapproving look.

“Fine,” Kunan announced. “Then the gloves are coming off, folks! Number Fourteen: Soupy swallows oil and spits fire!”

“HEY!” Soupy—or rather, whoever was inside him—protested from within the suit. The human-monster hybrid flailed his stout arms. “I can’t do that!”

“Quiet,” Kunan snapped. “I didn’t raise you to be such a quitter.”

“You didn’t raise me, period!”

Winia’s eyes widened. She could detect that argumentative tone anywhere.

“Shannon,” Winia began slowly, “is that Pacifica inside the —”

"Please." Shannon rubbed his temples, his eyes shut tight. "Saying it out loud just makes the mortification more real."

Michelle, who had redoubled her efforts to win over the crowd, attempted to untie the Raquel's wore.

"Come on, Raquel! Do it for the bittersweet buns!"

"Excuse me," Raquel retorted, doing her best to break free of Michelle. The two girls catfought on the platform, grabbing at each other in desperation. It was a very welcome sight for the men in the crowd.

"Yeah! Take it off!"

"Pull her hair, pull her hair!"

"Use your nails, ladies!"

Winia raised an eyebrow at Shannon, and he made to roll up his sleeves.

"All right," he muttered as he pushed his way through the crowd. "This is ending before I see something I regret."

Winia didn't know if he meant Pacifica gurgling oil, or Raquel losing all her clothes. She guessed that both options were equally horrible to him.

The battle of the mascots ended without a winner, but the townspeople didn't seem to care. They had obviously been successfully entertained. Winia had no idea whether or not the whole thing had increased any sales, but the Casulls didn't seem to worry about it. Winia was sure they were just happy it was over.

As Winia set out plates for dinner that evening, she heard Raquel sigh. She was slumped in her seat with her chin cupped in her hands.

"Oh, Soupy," Raquel murmured sadly. "I miss you already."

It was unusual to see Raquel so melancholy, and it unnerved Winia a bit. She placed a glass of juice in front of Raquel in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Sometimes I don't get you," Shannon complained. "You actually *liked* that disgusting little thing?"

Raquel dropped her head on the table. "Mm."

Winia started to arrange the napkins. "That's odd," she commented. "I didn't think you two were so disconnected."

Shannon looked up at her with a frown. "What?"

Winia paused, swallowed her discomfort, and continued with her train of thought. "I mean, families are supposed to be really close, aren't they? You've lived together for so long, and you grew up together... I figured you would know each other pretty well by now. Isn't that why you trust each other?"

The words sounded painfully naive to Winia's ears, and she regretted them the moment they came out of her mouth. Shannon, however, didn't seem bothered; he reached over and took Raquel's juice.

"If you lived with someone you knew absolutely everything about, you'd be pretty bored. It probably wouldn't be much different than being alone." He looked into the juice, frowned, and returned it to its place setting.

Winia paused. She'd never thought about it that way.

"Raquel always says that you learn things from people who are different. And to have trust in someone... well, that doesn't really depend on whether or not you know what they're thinking." He shrugged. "I think people should believe what they want to believe, regardless of whether or not things are spelled out."

"But... you might get betrayed that way." Winia said the words without thinking.

"If that happens, then you were stupid for trusting that person to begin with. It's completely up to you who you trust—and whatever comes with that is your responsibility."

Winia paused again. "I guess," she said after a moment.

"Anyway, that's just what I think." Shannon yawned. "You don't have to agree with it. Everyone has to make their own choices when it comes to trust."

Winia stared at him. Then, slowly, she smiled.

"I'm hungry!" Pacifica clomped down the stairs, completely ruining the moment. "Is dinner ready yet?"

Winia got back to setting the table. "In a minute," she murmured quickly.

Pacifica sighed and plopped down in the seat next to Shannon. She flashed him a smile, but he only stared steadily at her in response.

"By the way," he said darkly. "Where were *you* all day, Pacifica?"

"Huh? Oh." Pacifica randomly raised her arms in their air, then looked away. "I wanted to ask you something," she said after a moment. She tilted her head back, rested a hand on her cheek, and shot him her doe eyes. "...Do you think I'm cute?"

Silence filled the room. After a few awkward seconds, Shannon snorted.

"I've had enough of 'cute' today," he answered lowly. "Especially from you."

Pacifica regained her usual indignant scowl. "What?" she snapped. "Jeez, you're such a downer! You could've just said 'yes.'" She harrumphed and tucked her chin into her hand. "And as for that 'especially from you' hit, I have no idea what you're talking about."

Winia tried to hide her smile before heading to her half-destroyed kitchen.

As it turned out, the Kunan's Soupy Sales Strategy fell flat on its face. The bakery failed to realize that the cuter the mascot, the less customers wanted to eat food in its shape.

Michelle came over to the Big Bear Inn to celebrate her father's success. She brought the Casulls her finest First Love Buns... but no one seemed very interested.

The Songstress

Twilight.

The setting sun draped the room in deep shadow. The air was hushed and stagnant, as though happiness and light would never set foot in there again. A pale black-haired young woman lay limp in her bed. A young man whose face matched hers sat slumped in a chair nearby. The man sighed, his face troubled as he listened to the girl's rasping breath.

"How could this have happened? Oh, Raquel..."

"Shannon," the girl called out to him between shallow breaths. Her voice cracked painfully, and her brother winced at its sound. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't apologize. It won't do any good." Shannon brushed away the hand she'd reached out toward him. He stood and gazed blankly out the window.

"...Shannon?"

But her quiet word went unheeded. There was little more she could do for him now.

They both closed their eyes, despair filling the room.

"Hey, Shannon!"

The door burst open and Pacifica charged in, her face beaming. She held up an extremely gaudy red dress for Shannon's inspection.

"What do you think of this? I think it'll be perfect!" She whipped out another dress and held it beside the first. The second dress was dark blue, and possibly even gaudier.

"But this one is really cute too! Man, I can't decide!" She jumped up and down excitedly. "Ooh! And with a matching ribbon!"

Throughout her outburst, Shannon continued to stare silently out the window. His hand gripped the windowsill so

hard that his knuckles turned white.

“Oh, but underwear won’t work with either of these dresses. That would completely ruin the effect.”





Shannon could remain silent no longer. “Pacifica...”

“Now what did I do with that makeup?” Pacifica ignored his agonized plea.

“Pacifica...” he implored again, his fingers actually making dents in the wood he gripped.

“And we’re going to have to do something about that leg hair!”

“Pacifica!” Shannon barked. She finally turned to look at him, and he glared daggers at her.

“Are you really enjoying this that much?” he snapped.

“Of course.” Her blue eyes glinted with evil glee. “Raquel caught a cold, so now you have to put on a dress and sing. What’s not to enjoy? Now take off your pants!”

The windowsill that Shannon gripped suddenly broke in two.

The Wild Horse Inn was one of the oldest bars in Taurus. During the high season, it also functioned as a hotel, but even on the off months it could draw quite a crowd. The Wild Horse Inn had several popular attractions that brought in locals and tourists alike—the most famous being a popular singer who gave concerts under an exclusive contract.

Safir Colt, the owner of the Wild Horse Inn, paced up and down in front of the inn’s small stage.

“I can’t believe Iris caught a cold! Of all the rotten luck.” He scratched his head and surveyed the women who had come to speak to him. He sighed and shook his head.

“Well, at least we still have our opening act. How would you like to be the star tonight, Raquel?” He leaned in conspiratorially. “To tell you the truth, we’ve been getting a lot of extra reservations since we announced you’d be singing for us. You have quite the reputation around town, apparently.”

Safir gestured to the now-empty dining room. Sure enough, most of the tables bore paper signs that

read reserved.

“Well, it’ll be a little while longer before the crowd shows up. Why don’t you have a look around and make yourself comfortable?”

“Thank you,” answered Pacifica, acting as the assistant.

Assumedly noting his star’s silence for the first time, the innkeeper peered into his new employee’s face.

“Is something wrong, Raquel? Don’t tell me you’re sick, too.”

“No, no! My sister’s just saving her voice for the performance.” Pacifica waved a hand dismissively. “There’s nothing to worry about!”

“Good. I need to go help with preparations in the kitchen; if you need anything, just let me know.” Safir smiled approvingly, then left his new performer to prepare for the show.

Shannon sighed. “This is never gonna work.”

Pacifica burst into a fit of laughter. “Ha ha ha! Oh, say something else!”

Pacifica doubled over in her overwhelming amusement. Even Winia, who was usually so calm and composed, had to turn her back to the others and muffle her laughter. Shannon just glared.

He made an impressive woman. His tall stature and muscular frame made it a bit difficult to pass for a female, but Pacifica had done her job well—the dress she’d chosen was cut in a way that disguised his lack of curves, and a stuffed bra helped to create the illusion of an hourglass figure. A pretty scarf hid his Adam’s apple and makeup obscured his more masculine facial features. As long as the observer wasn’t looking too closely, he could definitely pass for a tall woman.

The only thing that couldn’t be disguised with clothes and makeup was his voice, which was far deeper than any woman’s. So Raquel had used a spell to make Shannon’s voice sound just like hers.

Hearing Shannon moan his usual complaints in Raquel's high-pitched girly voice was more than Pacifica could handle.

Winia finally regained her composure as she coughed the last of the laughter from her throat. "Well, the innkeeper didn't seem to notice anything strange," she said as she fought to stifle her wide smile. "I guess it's pretty lucky that you two look so similar."

"Yeah, lucky. I'm so lucky I get to wear a dress." Shannon pulled uncomfortably at his shimmering skirt. "Come on, this isn't funny."

Pacifica burst into another fit of giggles.

Somewhere between Shannon's eyebrow plucking and leg shaving, Winia had asked Raquel why she couldn't just change Shannon's appearance magically in the same way she planned to change his voice.

"It's much simpler to change sound than appearance," Raquel had explained. "A voice is simply air vibrations created in the person's mouth and throat. The magic I'm going to use on Shannon just adjusts that vibration slightly, making it higher-pitched."

"Changing the way someone looks is much more difficult. A single optical illusion spell, which manipulates light to create an image, only works from one angle. Fooling an entire crowd of people would take layers of illusion spells, and there would still be gaps where Shannon's true form would be visible."

Raquel had paused to sneeze. "Psychological illusion spells," she'd continued with a sniff, "take care of this problem by fooling people's minds into seeing the image I create. They're generally much simpler to use, but I would have to go to the bar and use it on every single person who came in." Raquel had then sneezed again and declared she was going back to bed.

None of Raquel's explanations made much sense to Winia, but she didn't think Raquel would cause her brother so

much grief if it wasn't completely necessary. She decided to not push the topic and simply enjoy the spectacle.

"Seriously, Pacifica," Shannon pleaded. "Let's just cancel this."

"We can't. Safir gave us an advance, and we already used it to rebuild that wall." Pacifica scanned the room, which was starting to fill up. "And it looks like this place is gonna be packed—if you back out now, he'll probably have a heart attack."

"I hope everything goes all right," Winia commented. "You still have a lot of repairs to pay for. Anyway, I'm heading back to the inn." She lurched for the door, but Shannon grabbed her arm.

"Wait! You're not leaving me, are you?" His eyes were wide with fear. "I'll need help to pull this off!"

"Pacifica will be here."

They both paused to look at Pacifica, who still had tears of laughter running down her face.

"I have a feeling she's not going to be much help."

Winia sighed. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I have work to do at the inn. And someone has to take care of Raquel."

"Don't worry," Pacifica declared. "We'll be fine, Shannon." Pacifica tweaked his nose. "No one could resist someone so *cute!*"

A wave of disgust left Shannon speechless. Winia saw this as her opportunity to head straight for the door.

Two mounted figures stood on a country road. Taurus' lights twinkled in the distance.

It was strange that honest travelers would be on the road after dark. Dangerous animals, bandits, and highwaymen often roamed the wilderness for tourists. But these were no ordinary travelers, as was obvious from the quality of their mounts: chestnut horses with the power and grace of military battle steeds.

The horsemen themselves were no less impressive. The larger of the two was a muscular man of about thirty, with short blond hair and piercing blue eyes. His angular face seemed stern, yet he was calm.

The smaller horseman was a boy with a handsome face and regal bearing. Although he wore drab traveling clothes, it was easy to imagine him wearing fine attire at the height of aristocratic fashion.

The man turned to his younger companion. "The Casull siblings must be well-versed in combat if they managed to defeat the Purgers," he murmured. "I'm not surprised they managed to beat you."

"It's a relief to hear you say so." The boy ran his fingers through his horse's mane. "Now that I've fought them once, I have a good understanding of their style. I'm confident I can beat them next time."

In the darkness on either side of the path, strange eyes glistened.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic."

The boy shrugged. "Well, they were in a position to take my life, and they spared it. I just can't help feeling that I'm betraying their kindness."

Rustling sounds surrounded them from all sides. The reptilian eyes circled closer, beginning to envelop the travelers.

"You can't allow your personal feelings to interfere with our mission. If this is going to be a problem, tell me now so I can get a replacement."

"That won't be necessary, Colonel Sturm," the boy replied. "Honestly, I'm looking forward to fighting them again."

A huge carnivorous lizard suddenly leapt out of the trees, aiming for the boy's head.

The boy barely seemed to care. He simply reached into his coat, pulled out a shortened battleaxe, and sliced the leaping lizard in two.

He quietly watched as the halves of the lizard's body hit the ground with a *splat*.

"Let's go, Chris," the man said as he urged his horse forward.

A second lizard sprung from the trees and onto the colonel's back. Without turning, he pulled a black rope from his pocket, lassoed the creature, and then crushed it with a flick of his wrist.





“So that’s Luke Sturm’s famous garrote,” Chris said, obviously impressed. “I’ve always wanted to see it. Perhaps I’ll have the honor of facing it in a duel someday?”

Luke snorted. “My hand-to-hand techniques are for self-defense. A duel between us would serve no purpose—save your skills for when they’re necessary.”

Chris smiled. “I see.”

“Our current task is to observe and analyze the Guardians. This will allow us to formulate a strategy for the inevitable conflict.”

Chris slid his axe into its proper hiding place. “Understood,” he replied politely.

“The performance should be starting soon.” Winia said, while staring out the window at the Wild Horse Inn.

Raquel nodded as she swallowed a spoonful of the stew that Winia had made. “I wish I could’ve heard Shannon sing. He’s pretty good, you know. When he was a child, he wanted to be a professional musician— I’m sure he’s still a better singer than me.”

“Really?” Winia frowned. “But Shannon seemed really reluctant to sing. Pacifica kept teasing him the entire time.”

“That’s just how those two are. You know Pacifica is crazy about her brother, right?” Raquel smiled faintly.

“Mm,” Winia hummed. “No matter how demanding Pacifica is he never seems to get angry.”

It makes me kind of jealous. Winia just barely stopped herself from saying the words out loud. She swallowed, embarrassed for almost blurting out something so selfish.

Winia’s only family was her grandmother. She was an only child who’d lost her parents as an infant, and her grandfather had passed away a year earlier. She knew that her grandparents loved her, but they’d always been distant with her with, almost as if they didn’t quite know how to deal with a child so late in life.

That was why Winia was so intrigued by Shannon and Pacifica. They were always so completely open with each other, even if it meant being mean or rude at times.

“Hey, Winia?” Raquel called out quietly.

“Hm?”

“Why is it that you never ask questions?” Raquel’s voice was soft, but her manner was very direct.

Winia frowned for a moment. It was true that there were many things she wanted to ask the siblings. Who were they? What was after them? Mysterious events seemed to follow the Casulls, and yet Winia had never pressed them for explanations.

“I... I don’t need to,” Winia murmured at last. Even now, she felt that keeping a distance was the smart thing to do—she couldn’t keep her friends with her forever, so why get too attached and suffer more down the line? The last thing Winia needed in her life was more heartbreak.

“I like all of you a lot, and that’s not going to change. Isn’t it enough to know I like you?” Winia asked with an awkward smile.

Raquel just stared at her blankly.

Shannon took his place on the inn’s small stage and surveyed the large room. Every inch of the place was filled with people, to the point where audience members had to stand in the back or sit on the floor. No one yelled or fought or even murmured quietly, which was odd for a crowd that size. Instead, they sat in silence, eager for the show.

Luckily for Shannon, the expectant crowd had also been drinking steadily for some time. Their wits were just foggy enough to not see through his disguise.

Shannon cleared his throat. Scattered applause quickly escalated into wild cheers. Shannon spotted Pacifica in the crowd and tried to give her a look that conveyed all his frustration at her and the situation. She either didn’t notice or didn’t care, because she gave him a big grin and a thumbs-up.

Shannon raised his lute. The crowd fell silent.

For a moment he stood there, frozen by the prospect of so many eyes and ears on him regardless of whom they thought he was. But that tense moment passed, and his fingers found a gentle melody. He took a deep breath and began to sing.

The song he chose was an old one about a man who was forced to leave his beloved with nothing but the promise of his return. Many years passed, and the man, driven by the memory of his true love, survived countless dangers. When he finally returned to his love's home, he learned that she'd gotten married, had children, and was very happy. She didn't even recognize him. It was only when he left again that she went after him. But, it was too late. He was gone.

Shannon's voice rose as the song came to a crescendo. For an unusually long moment, the Wild Horse Inn sat in complete silence.

Then the crowd erupted into cheers. Shannon could see that many of the audience members had tears streaming down their faces as they clapped and shouted.

He allowed himself a slight smile as he adjusted one of his lute strings.

I guess this isn't so bad, after all.

Hours passed. The atmosphere in the bar went from rowdy to subdued as the night's drinking caught up with everyone. A bunch of young men around a table laughed at nothing, while at the bar, a woman had passed out right on the counter. A man in the back sang out of tune to a wall. The people who were still up and about were all doing things they'd probably regret once they were sober.

Even though the concert had ended some time ago, all of Shannon's attempts to escape to his dressing room had failed. Every time he tried to leave, someone new would corner him and drag him back to what remained of the party. He was forced to go from table to table, accepting the

drinks that were foisted upon him and brushing off any drunks who became a bit too friendly.

"Come on, Raquel! Pull up a chair and drink with us!" A man pushed yet another drink into Shannon's hands and pulled him into a seat.

Shannon took some comfort in the fact that he was the one having drinks forced upon him instead of Raquel. Although neither of the siblings had much of a tolerance for alcohol, if Shannon got drunk, he might make a fool of himself or pass out. If Raquel got drunk, she'd probably burn the place down. Combat sorcerers and alcohol were not a good mix.

A drunk came over and put an arm around Shannon. "Damn," the man cooed. "You're so good-looking! Spend some time with me, sweet cheeks?"

"Oh, um, thanks, but I have to..."

Shannon pushed the man's arm away and bolted, only to run into another drunk who groped his rear end. Shannon barely restrained himself from breaking the man's nose.

"Oh, Raquel!" a man shouted as he ran toward Shannon. "You're the most beautiful girl in the world!"

"Stop it," Shannon demanded, but his protests fell on deaf ears. The man gripped him in a bear hug.

"Hey! Quit hogging her!"

"That's right! Raquel and I already pledged our love to each other!"

"Raquel! I know if you give me a try, you'll never give those other guys a second glance!"

A crowd started to form as more drunken, desperate men crowded around Shannon.

"Oh, Raquel, I'm a prisoner of your sparkling eyes, your soft hair, and these breasts... ah!" The young man buried his face in Shannon's fake chest and then looked up, confused. Half a second later, Shannon hit him square in the jaw and knocked him unconscious.

The crowd of drunks roared in surprise.

Damn, Shannon thought through his mild drunken haze. *I've given myself away*. He scanned the room, hoping to find a place to run.

To his surprise, the crowd was cheering for him.

"All right! That showed him!"

"Hit me next!"

"Don't stop! Pound 'em!"

"Kick him in the teeth!"

Although luckily no one had seen through his disguise, his attack had turned an already-bad situation worse. The crowd of admirers seemed to lose what little restraint they'd had and ran at Shannon en masse, grabbing onto him wherever they could reach.

"D-don't touch that!" Shannon shouted as he struggled to free himself.

"Come on, there's no need to get angry."

"Yeah, Raquel. Just relax!"

"It's not fair to be sober when everyone else is drunk."

"Here you go!" Someone shoved a bottle in his mouth.

Shannon looked down to discover it was Pacifica, laughing hysterically. Her face was bright red, and she gripped a half-full wine bottle in the hand that wasn't forcing beer down Shannon's throat. She must have not realized the wine was alcoholic because of its high sugar content.

"Pafifama!" Shannon yelled around the bottle. "Mop it!"

"Shut up and drink!" Pacifica tipped the beer into his mouth, and he was forced to chug it down.

Shannon's vision started to get fuzzy as the alcohol moved through his body. The people holding him, sensing weakness, redoubled their efforts to grope him.

Somebody's hand grabbed his bottom and squeezed.

It was the last straw.

"That's IT!" Shannon roared as he twisted his body with all his might, sending drunks flying in all directions. He flipped onto his feet and struck a fighting stance.

“Face me like men, you perverts! I won’t let you lay a finger on Raquel!”

Luckily, no one was sober enough to notice Shannon’s strange comment—even Shannon didn’t seem to notice what he was saying.

The drunks who were still on their feet formed up for the attack.

“First opponent—I’m Falk, the blacksmith! I’m twenty-seven and single! My hobby is gardening! Here I come!” A young man hollered and ran at Shannon, who floored him with an elbow to the gut.

“Fat chance!”

“Second opponent—Michelle, from the bakery! I’m an innocent seventeen-year-old who’s feeling lucky tonight! Our love will bloom like a beautiful flower!”

“Your love dies!”

“Third opponent—Pacifica! I don’t really know what’s going on, but here I come anyway!”

“Dammit, Pacifica! Get out of here!”

“Fourth opponent—Randall, the doctor—”

“Too slow, old man!”

And thus the party at the Wild Horse Inn continued into the night.

Bodies of the unconscious and wounded covered the floor.

Exhausted, battered, and starting to feel the effects of a wicked hangover, Shannon staggered toward his dressing room.

“I will never, *ever*, drink alcohol again,” he mumbled.

“Quite a night, eh?” an amused voice called out to him. Shannon turned to see Safir holding a jug of water.

Shannon answered incoherently and took the jug.

Safir smiled an apology. “I’m sorry you had such a difficult time tonight,” he said. “Nobody meant any harm by it. In a small town like this, there isn’t much to do for fun, so people will take any excuse to party.”

"I understand that, but..."

"I know, I know. But I hope you'll come back and entertain us again, Shannon."

"Not in a million—" Suddenly realizing what the man had said, Shannon snapped his head up in surprise. Safir just smiled, his face the picture of content.

Oh, crap.

"I could tell as soon as you started singing. Raquel sang for me once and your styles are very different."

Shannon spread his palms apologetically. "Sir, there's an explanation for this—"

Safir raised a hand to stop him. "Look," he said firmly. "The house was packed, and they loved you. You don't have to explain a thing."

Shannon sighed. *Phew*, he thought. *At least not everyone feels like being a jerk tonight.*

"But you're really something, Shannon. Where'd you learn to sing like that?"

Shannon shrugged. "My late mother came from a family of court musicians. She didn't carry on the family business herself, but she knew how to sing, so she taught Raquel and I when we were kids."

Safir turned to where Pacifica lay snoring. "And her?"

"She was only four when our mother passed. Raquel's been her mother since then." Shannon chugged the water straight from the jug. After a night of performance and battle cries, his throat needed all the comfort it could get.

"Ah. Well, anyway, thanks again for performing—it's not every day we get crowds like that." He raised an eyebrow. "I'd be willing to offer you an exclusive contract, if you're interested. You could even perform duets with Raquel."

Shannon brought down the jug and panted. "Thanks," he breathed, "but no thanks. We don't plan to stay in town much longer."

“Don’t you like it here?”

“It’s not that.” Shannon paused awkwardly, not sure how to explain. “This is a nice town, and my sisters and I appreciate how welcoming you’ve all been. It’s just...” He frowned. “That’s all the more reason why we can’t stay here too long.”

“...Then it’s probably better if I don’t ask why.”

“I’m sorry.” Shannon bowed his head.

Safir patted Shannon heartily on the back. “Don’t worry about it, my boy. I’ll be sorry to see you go, but I suppose you have your reasons. But you *will* be around for a little while, right?”

“Until we finish paying for the repairs to the Big Bear Inn.” Shannon took another chug.

Suddenly, Safir’s expression turned serious. “Listen,” he said as his voice went low. “I have a favor to ask.”

Shannon pulled down the water jug. “What?”

“It’s about Winia. We’re in the same business, so I’ve known her for a long time. She’s had a difficult life, and because of it she’s never really gotten along with anyone. She always acts so adult-like and closes herself off. But since you and your sisters came to town, well... I’ve never seen her act so young or smile so much.”

Safir looked Shannon straight in the eye. “I don’t know why you’re traveling,” he murmured. “But when you leave, do it in a way that doesn’t hurt her.”

Shannon smiled faintly at Safir.

“I’ll try,” he promised.

In the woods outside Taurus, far from any human dwelling, an unnatural silence hung in the air. Not a single insect buzzed; not a single bird chirped. It was as if sound itself had been erased.

A voice rang out.

“I will repeat the plan of action,” it stated. There was no sign of the voice’s owner, nor was there a response.

The incorporeal voice went on. "Each team will move to their designated location and execute lockdown. Detain any man who tries to enter or exit the action zone. Await further orders from Colonel Sturm; if the order for action is not heard by one-twenty Glock, retreat from the location."

"If the order for action *is* announced," the voice continued without a shred of hesitation, "eliminate every last citizen to maintain Class 1 Confidentiality regarding the Scrapped Princess."

Still was there no response. The words vanished into the night, becoming a part of the cold silence.

After a while, the sound of buzzing insects and chirping birds filled the woods once again—as if nothing had ever happened.

Return of the Tactician

Sensitivity and durability. Weapons, especially those of the bladed variety, were tools that walked the thin line between the two contradictory characteristics. The sharper a blade was, the more fragile it tended to be; the duller it was, the less effective.

The finest of combat swords were produced and maintained after much trial and error. Attempting to keep a blade sharp yet sturdy was a difficult and often unsuccessful endeavor, and the ideal balance between edge and sturdiness varied from user to user. There were as many varieties of sword-making as there were swordsmen and swords.

“Hey, Shannon!”

Weapons required regular maintenance in order to withstand the abrasive conditions of battle.

Such maintenance required a great deal of time, effort, and painstaking attention to detail.

“Shannon! I’m talking to you!”

When performing maintenance on weaponry, one needed care, precision, and absolute concentra—

“Stop *ignoring* me, jerkface! You’ll pay for this!”

Shannon’s patience was finally exhausted when Pacifica stuffed his long hair into an ugly side ponytail. He tugged his head out of her hold, turned to her, and glared.

“*What*, your highness?”

The action sent Shannon’s awkward ponytail bobbing. Pacifica laughed and pointed.

“Wow, Shannon!” she exclaimed. “You look so cute like that!”

“I’m sure that’s a lie.”

“Seriously. All you need now is a dress, some fake boobs, and—”

Shannon abruptly pulled the hair-tie off and let his hair fall back into place. “I thought I told you never to bring up the dress thing again.”

“Yeah, right.” Pacifica waved him off with her hand. “And since when do I listen to you?”

Shannon sighed into the autumn breeze. The Big Bear Inn’s backyard had a flowerbed, a small pond, and a charming white table for guests to enjoy outdoor tea. Unfortunately, the makeshift stove Shannon had built ruined the once-elegant garden.

Shannon rested the sword he’d been trying to clean on the grass. “If you like the style so much,” he muttered as he retied his usual low ponytail, “why don’t you wear it yourself?”

“Oh, I’m already cute enough as it is.”

Shannon said nothing, his face blank.

Pacifica, unsurprisingly, took great offense at his reaction.

“Hey!” she snapped. “What the heck was that?! It’s almost like you were disagreeing with the undeniable fact that I’m painfully cute! Would you care to be more direct with your sovereign ruler, Shannon Casull?!”

Shannon really had better things to do that day, so he gave up early.

“No, Princess Pacifica. You’re the most beautiful creature I’ve ever had the fortune to lay my eyes on.”

Pacifica scowled at Shannon’s tone. “Say it like you mean it!”

Shannon ignored her and went back to his father’s sword. “Didn’t you have something to tell me?” he asked.

The indignation fell from Pacifica’s face just as quickly as it had risen up. “Oh. Winia wanted you to go shopping with her—she said she’s got a lot of things to buy.”

Shannon scratched the back of his neck. *Porter duty*, he thought. *Great.*

Still, Winia was letting the Casull siblings stay at the Big Bear Inn at-cost. Shannon was in no position to refuse her request.

“Fine.” Shannon bent back over his sword. “Tell her I’ll be a minute—I’m almost done here.”

“Okay. Buy me something pretty while you’re out?”

“I thought we decided you’re pretty enough.”

“Hey!”

On a small hill that overlooked the town of Taurus, Luke Sturm stood in calm silence. With his powerful build and face of steel, the imposing air he emanated was nearly warm to the touch.

“Colonel Sturm.” A soldier’s voice seemed to rise out of nowhere. “Reporting current conditions, sir.”

Luke Sturm didn’t bother turning. Using illusion magic, his subordinates had bent the surrounding light to conceal themselves. Trying to see anything or anyone was a waste of time.

“Team 2 has detained a caravan of seven traveling merchants; Team 5 has detained one male. Both squads operate under Class 2 detainment. Should we continue the lockdown, sir?”

Luke gave a slight nod. “All teams continue operations.”

“With all due respect, Colonel,” came another voice, this one slightly skeptical. “Are you comfortable leaving everything in the tactician’s hands?”

“Christopher Armalite is from Adamant Arrow. Their combat capabilities are unmatched.”

“But sir—”

Luke waved to silence his subordinate.

“The Arrow takes its reputation very seriously,” Luke continued “They need to chase their loss and eradicate it, even if it does step on our toes.”

The invisible soldier said nothing. Luke let out a breath.

“Let the boy make the first attack. Baroness and her Arrow will owe us for the opportunity; they’ll owe us again if her tactician needs us to finish the job. This isn’t a bad thing.”

“Understood, sir. Blackhawk is standing by.”

Luke let his eyes focus on Taurus once more. He knew that his Blackhawk, more specifically known as the Special Unit of the Royal Military Intelligence Division, would follow his directions despite any dissident. His men were used to taking distasteful orders... and they already knew that “finishing the job” meant wiping Taurus off the map.

Luke Sturm wasn’t a cruel man, he simply left his emotions at the door. It was a necessary compromise for the leader of a unit unseen by the public and responsible for anything from palace-sponsored kidnapping to royalty-decreed assassination. Along with the Royal Special Forces Battalion 4, also known as Crimson Sword, and the Royal Special Forces Battalion 5, also known as Adamant Arrow, they formed the dark side of the Royal Military. The Blackhawk was known as the deadliest of the covert action units.

And yet, for a man used to sealing off his heart on duty, he couldn’t help but feel the barest hint of emotion for the tactician in question.

“I sincerely doubt he’ll win,” Luke said quietly.

“I agree, sir. And even if he does, he’ll suffer for it.” The voice of the subordinate was laced with a hint of nostalgia.

Luke remained stoic; he had work to do, and he needed to be prepared for that.

“An overly fine blade will fail in battle,” he remarked as he stared down at the town below.

Christopher Armalite sat in a bakery, gazing out of the window that overlooked the main shopping street of Taurus. He was a bit uncomfortable with the fact that he was the only customer in the place that day, but he forced himself to

relax. There was nothing about him that would draw attention, anyway.

"Here you go."

Chris looked up. A young woman stood by his table with a tray of bread and tea. She smiled brightly.

"Oh." He suddenly remembered that he'd ordered something—a type of promotional bread. He pushed back in his chair to make room for the food she was placing before him.

The girl eventually straightened, folding the tray under her arms so she could tuck it against her chest. She smiled at him again... and didn't move.

Chris raised an eyebrow at her. *Do I have something on my face?*

"Wow," she said at last, her black eyes glittering with mischief. "You must *really* be in love."

Chris almost fell out of his chair at the sheer idiocy of the statement. But, being the master of self-control that he was, he only displayed his surprise with a raise of his eyebrow.

"Excuse me?"

The girl smiled knowingly. "Those longing looks out the window, and all those sighs. It's a dead giveaway!"

"Um... that doesn't mean—"

The girl held out a hand. "You don't have to explain it—love just happens sometimes, y'know? It's nothing to be ashamed of." She leaned forward a bit. "So? Who is she? And why does twilight make you daydream about her?"

Chris wasn't sure what he could say to get the girl to leave, but a voice from the kitchen saved him the trouble.

"Not again, Michelle!" A middle-aged man poked his head out from the back of the bakery. "Stop bothering the customers and help me get this out of the oven!"

The girl frowned and scurried toward the kitchen, glancing back for one final look at Chris.

"Good luck!" she called before disappearing from sight.

For a moment, Chris sat in a mild daze. The silence surrounding him felt heavy... and it wasn't that way before the girl showed. He stared down at the bread that had been placed before him.

What's wrong with me?

He blinked his eyes once in an attempt to clear his head. The girl, unfortunately, had commented on something Chris had hoped to suppress—his unusual emotional confusion. He hadn't been the same since losing to Shannon Casull.

Chris tore a piece off a piece of his bread and pushed it into his mouth. There must have been some kind of herb in it; it had a fragrant smell to it, and tasted bittersweet.

Love. Well, he probably *did* look like he was in love. Love and hate had a lot in common—they could both fool one's heart and severely cloud judgment. And neither feeling left its owner in much control.

Chris had never really felt much of anything for anybody, and he wanted things to stay that way. It was what helped him complete his missions and kept him succeeding when the slightest hesitation could result in his anti-climactic death. So the fact that Chris couldn't sleep at night because he was obsessing about Shannon Casull, well, it unsettled him to no end.

What's he doing now? Chris couldn't help but wonder. He saw Shannon's face under his eyelids and heard Shannon's voice in his inner ear. He fantasized about what Shannon was doing, and why, and for how long. He wondered what kept *Shannon* up at night.

So? Was it hate that he felt, or love?

Chris smiled at the stupidity of the question. He also fantasized about his axe shattering through Shannon's sword and continuing toward Shannon's head.

Chris pushed away his tea. He was going to fight Shannon again, and he was going to win.

And I'm going to do it soon, he added to himself as he watched Shannon and a young woman walk across the

street.

"Let's see..." Winia checked the shopping list in her hand. "Two kinds of spices, flour, new plates, lamp oil—that's everything." She glanced over at Shannon. "We can go home now."

Shannon shifted the packages in response. She didn't think the items weighed too much, but they were still bulky and piled entirely on his left arm. He walked awkwardly by Winia's side.

Winia frowned at him. "Wouldn't it be easier if you used both hands?" she asked.

"I like to keep my right free." He shifted the packages again.

"Why?"

As she spoke, Shannon reached toward Winia with his right hand.

Whap!

A small ball, worn from overuse, slapped into Shannon's palm. A child spluttering apologies ran up behind it.

"Sorry!" the boy cried, waving his hands frantically. "Did I hit you, lady?"

Winia stared at the boy, her heart thundering from the close call. Shannon dropped the ball and kicked it toward its owner.

The boy ran after it. "Thanks!" he called behind him.

Shannon continued down the street. Winia quickly ran to catch up.

"Um, Shannon?" she asked, her voice a little higher than before. She cleared her throat. "Let me, uh... carry half of those."

"Don't bother," he answered tiredly. "I'll lose my balance if I try handing anything to you."

Winia pursed her lips and stayed silent. She tilted her head toward the ground and couldn't help but smile slightly.

That was when she slammed into his back.

“Mmph!” she snorted, grabbing her nose. She realized *he* had stopped dead in his tracks.

The look on Shannon’s face made the hairs on the back of Winia’s neck rise.

“Sh-Shannon?” she almost squeaked. She cleared her throat again. “What’s the matter?”

His eyes never lowering, Shannon knelt on the sidewalk and dropped Winia’s packages. His sword made a faint clinking sound as he gripped the hilt at his waist.

Winia’s blood ran cold. Seeing the sword hanging by his side was a powerful reminder of what she’d almost forgotten: who he was, and what he was running from. Winia ferociously looked around.

“Sh-Shannon,” she stuttered, “we should really, uh... go. Pacifica’s probably ready to throw a fit by now, y’know? We’re a lot later than...” Winia trailed off, her heartbeat growing louder in her ears. She didn’t see anything around them. Was something wrong? But she knew the answer—there was trouble nearby, made worse by the fact that it was something she *couldn’t* see.

All of a sudden, a thousand thoughts crowded her brain. Were they about to be attacked? Would Shannon protect her? For a second, her fear of the imminent danger was overcome by a deeper, more permanent fear: if someone was after Pacifica, she and her family would leave, and Winia would be alone again. It was probably selfish of her to have made them stay in the first place, considering who they were. They lived a life of constant danger, a precarious existence she couldn’t possibly fathom.

Winia’s eyes darted to Shannon’s sword. For a fleeting second, she wondered if he’d ever killed someone with it.

“Hn.”

Shannon’s murmur snapped Winia out of her frantic thoughts. Her nerves on end, she watched as he carefully removed his hand from his sword.

"Maybe not." He bent to pick up the packages. "Maybe I just... hn. Never mind."

Winia's jaw nearly dropped. *Huh?* she thought. *Is that... it?*

"What were you saying earlier?" Shannon asked, balancing the goods on his arm. As he picked up the last paper bag, something clattered.

Shannon stopped. Winia, her brain slowly reentering reality, looked at what he had.

Those... those were the plates.

Shannon winced. He crinkled the bag, and it once again emitted the sound of broken porcelain.

"Oops."

Winia's heart began to slow. She swallowed as relief flooded through her veins.

"It must have happened when you dropped them," she sighed as she took the bag from him. "Well, that investment didn't last long."

Shannon dropped his head.

"I'm sorry, Winia."

She waved it off. "Maybe you should just go back to the inn. I'm sure Pacifica's waiting, and I can go replace these myself."

She could feel Shannon's disapproval, but she refused to look up as she balanced the bag back on Shannon's stack. She needed to leave and clear her head. She was embarrassed and confused.

"I'm not sure that's a good—"

"Don't run with the bag," she interrupted. "You'll just break the plates that are still in one piece." Without so much as waiting for a reply, Winia sped off in the opposite direction, her eyes fixed squarely on the sidewalk beneath her feet. She was relieved that Shannon didn't follow.

Winia swallowed hard and picked up the pace. A few moments of Shannon's concern and she'd turned into a complete mess. She had become more worried about the

Casulls leaving than about how the Casulls might someday get her killed.

Winia squeezed shut her eyes. *What is all this? And what's wrong with me?*

The light that seeped in through the window had turned the amber of sunset. Pacifica, slumped at the dining room table beside her sister, made a point of flopping her arms out across the table.

"What's taking them so long?" Pacifica complained. Mechanical clocks were a luxury item the Big Bear Inn couldn't afford, so she wasn't sure what time it was. "I want dinner."

Without looking up, Raquel calmly moved her tea away from Pacifica's jiggling hands. "I don't know," Raquel replied, her voice still just the barest bit hoarse from her cold. "I suppose we'll just have to wait."

Pacifica glanced at the book Raquel read. She knew that the *Encyclopedia of Magical Spells* would only include the magic officially recognized by the Royal Academy of Sorcery, which meant no special magic or military magic, the latter of which was restricted to learn, let alone use.

Then it's a good thing she's good enough to combine basic spells, Pacifica thought.

"Jeez," Pacifica complained, dropping her head on the table. "How much shopping could they possibly be doing?"

"Mm."

"Do you think something happened?"

"Mm."

Pacifica glared at her sister. Raquel continued reading her book, oblivious to Pacifica's gaze.

"Hunh," Pacifica tried. "Maybe the two of them are too busy kissing in some abandoned alley."

"Mm."

"Winia is Shannon's type, isn't she?"

“He told me once that he prefers girls with long hair,” Raquel answered without missing a beat. “He was pretty popular with the girls at Sunday school, so I’m sure he’s thought about it. He said he didn’t place particular preference on a body type, but rather liked long hair.”

Pacifica absently fingered her own pinned-back hair, then dropped her hand and snorted. “That’s so like you, Raquel.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You have this spaced-out look on your face all the time, but you actually know exactly what’s going on.”

“I’m not spaced-out,” Raquel replied in a spaced-out voice.

“See?”

Raquel finally closed her book and looked up. She smiled very slightly, almost mischievously... and Pacifica shrank back in her chair. She knew that look, and it meant trouble.

“Oh, Pacifica,” Raquel hummed. “You just can’t get enough of Shannon, can you?”

Pacifica’s eyes shot wide open. “What?!” she shrieked.

‘Don’t take my brother away from me!’” Raquel cooed in a baby voice, imitating Pacifica.

Pacifica felt the blood rush to her head. *Th-that’s not fair!* she protested inwardly. *No one’s allowed to bring up embarrassing childhood memories to make a point!*

“Do you remember?” Raquel asked. “You were five years old. Shannon was about to go play with a girl from the neighborhood—”

“No!” Pacifica snapped. “I don’t remember at all! I completely forgot!” To emphasize her point, she banged both fists on the table. “And why are you being so cruel?!”

Raquel watched her cup of tea rock precariously. When she looked back up, a slight sulk pulled at the space between her eyebrows.

“You never come to me for attention,” Raquel said sadly.

“I’m not after anyone’s attention!” Pacifica snarled. Crossing her arms, she angrily slouched in her chair.

“...Pacifica.”

Sensing a slight change of tone in Raquel’s voice, Pacifica glanced up.

Raquel, her dark eyes fixed on Pacifica, reached out and gently stroked her hair.

“Don’t worry,” she said softly. “Shannon’s not going anywhere.”

Pacifica sat in silence, unsure of what to say. Her gaze fell to a corner of the table.

“I know... it’s just...”

“And I won’t leave you, either. Something stronger than blood is tying us to you.” Raquel let one long finger trail down Pacifica’s cheek. “So don’t worry, all right? We’re here because we want to be.”

Pacifica felt her cheeks blush. Keeping her eyes down, she nodded slightly.

Maybe that’s what people call presence, Winia thought, staring at the boy.

“Hello there,” he said.

Despite his cold beauty, Winia tried to remain calm. How old was he? Fifteen? At that age, people were supposed to have a certain degree of innocence... but the boy seemed to have none whatsoever.

“Yes?” Winia asked uncomfortably.

He took another step toward her, closing the gap between them. They were on a sidewalk being passed by hurried townspeople eager to eat their dinners, but Winia still felt alone and cornered as he came near. He was keenly out of place in the bustling Taurus street.

“You know Shannon Casull, right?”

Winia stiffened. Even if her life had nothing to do with Pacifica’s fate, she could still see what was going on. “N-no,” she mumbled, her heart suddenly racing in her chest. “Shannon who?”

He smiled coldly. “I don’t believe you.”

Winia quickly turned to go, but the boy's hand shot out and gripped her shoulder. He dug his fingers in so hard she was afraid she'd bleed.

"Help!" she cried. "Somebody, help me!"

"Winia?"

Winia thanked whatever greater power was out there. Falk, the town's strapping young blacksmith, happened to be right down the street. He quickly strode up and stared disapprovingly at Chris.

"What's the matter?" Falk asked Winia. "Is he bothering you?"

Falk was a full head taller than Winia, and probably twice her girth. He was an impressive presence beside the slim boy who gripped Winia.

Winia nodded quickly, tears in her eyes. Falk glared down at the boy.

"I don't know who you are, kid, but you'd better let her go."

The boy smiled. "I'd stay out of this if I were you," he said before whipping his free hand. His fist met Falk's body.

"Uhmpf!"

Letting out a surprised grunt, the blacksmith was lifted off the ground, then crashed onto the sidewalk several steps back from where he'd been standing.

Murmuring filled the evening air. A crowd started to form around the boy, and confused townspeople had to peek over each other to catch a look.

"Did you see that?"

"That kid just punched Falk!"

"Is he from around here?"

With a grimace, Falk pushed himself to his feet.

The boy raised an eyebrow. "You're pretty tough for an amateur," he said.

Falk spat blood, then smiled without humor. "My boss has been hitting me for years. I guess it was good for something."

Falk raised both arms in front of his chest in what looked like a self-taught fighting pose.

"I wasn't kidding," the boy said, a touch of warning behind his calm voice. "Stay out of this."

"I don't like how you talk to adults, kid."

"And I don't like how to talk to professionals, amateur."

Falk lunged at the boy to restrain him, but the boy quickly shifted.

Thud!

Falk choked, his arms shaking. Winia noticed the end of a pole sticking out from the boy's gray jacket.

The boy jerked his arm. The pole that was digging into Falk's stomach swung back just as its extensions swung up and clicked into place. Falk fell onto his knees, now within range of a battleaxe as tall as his lithe attacker.

"Sleep tight," the boy said as he lowered the axe into the back of Falk's head. Falk crumpled to the sidewalk in a large, silent heap.

Winia screamed. A few members of the crowd did the same, although more of them stepped back in fear.

The boy turned back to Winia, paying no mind to the collective panic. Winia was terrified to find out that not only was the boy not out of breath, but he'd never let go of her shoulder throughout the melee.

"Sorry," he said with a small, almost apologetic smile. "But it looks like you've been assigned to be bait, sister."

Sensing someone approaching, Shannon looked up. He sent a meaningful glance at Raquel.

"Who is that?" he asked.

Raquel looked up from the apple she peeled. "Hm? Oh." She closed her eyes, assumedly checking her mental Asgard data screen. "Let me see..."

Shannon picked up his sword. After sensing something during his evening shopping trip, he'd asked Raquel to deploy an Asgard sensor spell. He again realized how lucky

he was to have a sister with such an impressive mental capacity.

“Subject isn’t carrying any metal that could be a weapon. At that height, weight, and stride... it’s probably Mister Colt from the Wild Horse Inn.” She opened her eyes again and looked to Shannon. “Hm.”

A few moments later, there was a knock at the door. Pacifica abruptly lifted her head from the table on which it rested.

“Is that Winia?” she asked excitedly.

“No.”

Pacifica scowled. “Man,” she growled, resting her head once more. “I’m *starving*.”

Shannon walked past Pacifica and refrained from making a comment. When he reached for the door, it was suddenly pulled open from outside.

“Shannon!”

The short middle-aged, but presumably healthy, Safir Colt stood on the doorstep out of breath and glistening with sweat.

Shannon tightened his grip on his sheathed sword. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

Safir nodded, panting hard. Raquel and Pacifica ran to join their brother at the door.

“W-Winia!” Safir managed. “You have to save... Winia!”

“Winia?!” Pacifica exclaimed. She gripped Raquel’s arm. “What happened to Winia?!”

Safir shook his head and swallowed. “She was kidnapped by some boy no one recognizes!” He looked up at Shannon with panicked eyes. “He knocked out the blacksmith and then ran away with Winia!”

Shannon froze. “Boy?” he repeated.

An Unwavering Bond

Shannon, unfortunately, wasn't surprised.

It was only a matter of time, he reminded himself darkly. Remember, you don't have the luxury of a normal life anymore.

The danger the Casulls brought to their surroundings was precisely why they had left their home and chosen a life of wandering. They were aware of the risk involved with spending a substantial time in one place, but all the traveling had exhausted them.

And as much as Shannon hated to recognize it, he'd become overconfident and let his guard down.

Shannon took a deep breath. *You do that again, he warned himself, and you'll pay for it.*

"Falk should be okay," Safir said as he reached into his pocket. "But the boy left you this."

Pacifica leaned forward as if to say something, but Shannon shot her a look. She must have seen something sinister in his eyes, because she shrank back.

Safir handed Shannon a small piece of paper. On it was written a message in careful handwriting:

*To Guardian Shannon Casull,
I'm waiting for you at Arwen Canyon.
Come alone, or else.
Christopher Armalite*

Shannon didn't look up. "Where's Arwen Canyon?"

"Leave town from the North Gate and walk northeast for about half a Glock. It's the Valley of Glass—the place is so dangerous that it's forbidden to the public." Safir licked his lips nervously. "The citizen's patrol is rounding up all the young men in town. As soon as everything's ready, they'll head for—"

“That’s not a good idea.”

In stark contrast to Safir’s voice, Shannon didn’t sound the least bit tense. His words were painfully calm.

“Wh-what? Why not?”

“Sending a large group will only put Winia at risk. Besides, it’s not the kind of location that a crowd will be effective in. He’s already thought of that—that’s why he’s luring me there.”

On top of that, Shannon knew that mere numbers meant nothing to a trained specialist like Chris. The boy was a tactician: an expert in unusual combat conditions. Tacticians rarely operated in groups, and their training had taught them to set traps, snipe, and use land features to their advantage. A citizen’s patrol lacking any special training could be wiped out before ever seeing a target.

Shannon shoved the letter into his pocket. “I’m going alone.”

Safir wrung his hands. “But—”

“Please.” Shannon fixed his black eyes on Safir. “I swear I’ll bring Winia back safely.”

Safir’s argument died in his throat. He kept his gaze locked with Shannon’s for a moment, then, finally, he averted his eyes and sighed.

“Fine,” he grudgingly consented. “I’ll tell the citizen’s patrol to stay put.”

Shannon bowed lower than he had in a very long time. “Thank you,” he murmured.

The wind was cold on her cheeks.

Winia creased her brow as she felt sharp gravel pressing up against her chin. She was outdoors somewhere, on something hard and uncomfortable. She tentatively raised her heavy eyelids, then blinked a few times as she tried to adjust to the darkness.

A black wall spread as far as she could see. The wall’s vast surface was smooth like glass, and was covered with

innumerable cracks that spread across it like a net.

The random crisscross of lines created a complex pattern, cutting the reflection of the moon and stars into thousands of narrow fragments. The effect was staggering.

Where... am I? Winia wondered. She shifted her head slightly and scraped her chin against the gravel. She was at the base of an area enclosed by two giant walls, with barely enough space between them for two-way wagon traffic.

Arwen Canyon, the Valley of Glass. It was what everyone called the mysterious ravine located northeast of Taurus.

The canyon's peculiar land formations could be found all over the Dustovin Continent, but how and when the glass-like rock features had come into existence was a mystery. Legend had it that they were remnants from the Battle of Creation fought between Mauser and the Devil.

At that moment, two things simultaneously occurred to Winia: her hands and feet were tied and she had been kidnapped in the middle of town. Despite the panic that quickly rose in her heart, she couldn't help but feel embarrassed about how weak she was. The boy hadn't hit her hard enough to knock her unconscious, and the twine that bound her wasn't even that strong. Unfortunately, being around Shannon had made her painfully aware of her lack of physical strength.

Maybe I should start...working out or something, she thought as she wrestled with her bonds.





“So you’re finally awake.”

Winia froze. She swallowed once to raise her courage, before slowly turning her head.

The boy from earlier sat behind her, his back against the wall. He raised his eyebrows at her and smiled slightly.

He was eerie, to be sure. “Who are you?” she asked evenly. She was proud of how calm she managed to sound.

“Christopher Armalite.” He crossed his legs in front of him. “But you can call me Chris.”

“Are you an assassin?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. But don’t worry—I’m not after you. As long as the Guardians don’t try anything stupid, you’ll be home before you know it.”

“Then you’re... !” Before she knew it, Winia was shouting. In the back of her mind, she knew it wasn’t a good idea to do anything that might excite a killer, but the words still came tumbling from her mouth. “You can’t... no! Leave Pacifica alone! Why are you after her, anyway?!”

Chris smiled again, although this time his action was tainted by sarcasm. “Then I guess nobody told you,” he surmised.

Winia paused. “Told me what?”

Chris sighed and crossed his arms behind his head. “Once upon a time,” he recited, “a queen gave birth to a twin boy and girl. They were the long-awaited heirs, blah blah blah, but the whole kingdom went into a panic because of one nasty little prophecy.” He leveled icy calm eyes at her. “Sound familiar now?”

Winia’s mouth opened, but no sound came out.

Every citizen in the kingdom knew that story, despite the fact that no one was supposed to.

Of the twin children born to the queen, kill the female. In sixteen years she will bring forth the Day of Destiny and destroy the world.

“Th-the Oracle of Saint Grendel,” Winia breathed. She knew it only as a folk tale—nobody, including those who

repeated the story, associated any sort of truth to it. The legend of the princess who had been secretly slaughtered at her father's orders without ever having been given a name was just that—a legend.

Shock gripped Winia's heart. The Scrapped Princess... Pacifica wasn't the Scrapped Princess, was she?

"The prophecy was fourteen years ago." The boy smiled again, but Winia almost sensed pain behind it. "One day, by sheer chance, the palace learned that the girl they thought they'd slaughtered was still somehow alive. The royal family panicked, thinking that some grudge-bearing doom princess was going to waltz up to the palace and murder her parents before destroying the world."

Chris shrugged. "Still, none of the higher-ups could agree on what to do. Mauser Church leaders thought assassination was a top priority, but the palace and its intelligence wanted her executed in order to maintain their authority. Then there were certain forces within the military that wanted to use the princess as leverage in their power struggle with the royal family." Chris laughed. "So now everyone's too busy keeping everyone else in check to do much. It's pretty sad, actually."

Winia's blood curdled. A call for death from both the palace and the heads of the kingdom's official religion was more serious than anything she'd ever heard of before. And the accuracy of the Grendel prophecies was supposed to be absolute.

But then that would mean... the boy had been sent by the royal military, if not the Church or palace itself.

And that there really *was* a Scrapped Princess who could destroy the world.

The image of Pacifica's face flashed across Winia's mind.

"It... it's not true," she breathed. "It can't be."

Pacifica, the girl who was making new friends when she wasn't acting like a spoiled brat at home. Pacifica, who had

reached out to Winia and never let go. Young Pacifica.
Normal Pacifica.

She was going to destroy the world?

"It...it's not true," Winia whimpered. "It's not..."

Chris watched Winia whine, his lips still curled in a smile.

Shannon pulled a suit of armor from the carriage parked behind the Big Bear Inn. He hefted each piece to test its weight.

It was light—at least reasonably so. It had been made of leather and simmered in wax to increase its hardness. It wouldn't slow him down like sheet metal armor, and it would provide him with extra protection against an opponent.

Shannon frowned. *I'd still rather fight in clothes.*

"I'm going with you!"

Shannon glanced behind him. Pacifica came barreling out of the inn, wildly waving a broom around her head as if it could kill enemies in spades.

Shannon turned away from her and started strapping on the armor. "Go back inside," he ordered.

"No way! This is my fight, and I'll—"

"Use your brain, would you?" Shannon pulled his hair-tie free and slid it between his teeth. "You walk in there," he mumbled around the twine as he pulled his hair into a new ponytail, "and you'll be handing him what he wants on a silver platter. You're the last person who should be going anywhere near that canyon."

Pacifica's face fell. Her eyes trailed over her brother's body.

"I thought you said armor slows you down," she said quietly.

"It does." He slid on his gloves. "But I still need it today."

"But that's... Father's armor."

Shannon slowed to a stop. He looked down at the Brigadier Model Zero set that hugged his tall frame. Yuma

Nanbu Casull, Shannon's biological father, had worn it during his fighting days.

Shannon sighed. He slowly reached out and took the broom from Pacifica's now-limp hands.

"Look. It's not... I'll be fine, all right?" When she didn't look up, Shannon averted his eyes uncomfortably. "I'll bring Winia back, I promise."

Pacifica curled her shoulders inward, her trembling fist coming up to rub against an eye. "Th-this is all my fault," she murmured, her voice taking on a slightly higher lilt. "If anyone else gets hurt because of me, I just... I don't know what I..."

She trailed off. Shannon looked down at her lowered blonde head and felt a combination of guilt, pity, and depression well up inside him. He slowly leaned the broom against the carriage.

"Just stay here with Raquel," he muttered as he reached for his sword. "You can make dinner while I'm gone."

Pacifica sniffed. "I... I guess."

"But pay attention while you're doing it. Winia's had a long day, so don't make her come home to crap."

Pacifica's head shot up. "I don't make *crap*!" she snarled, her cheeks turning red. "And you're not such a master chef yourself, jerk!"

Shannon buckled his sword belt around his waist. "I have other skills to hone, thank you."

Raquel stepped out of the inn and waved at Shannon. He nodded at her, then checked his equipment one last time as she walked over.

"Are you ready, Shannon?"

"Yeah." He clenched and unclenched his newly gloved hands. "Look after Pacifica while I'm gone."

"Of course." Raquel smiled down at her sister, then raised cautionary eyes to her brother. "And Shannon, I'm sure I don't need to tell you this, but don't—"

"I know, Raquel." He met her gaze. "Let's do this."

Raquel paused. Slowly, she stretched her right hand toward her brother and began a recitation.

“O, thou with whom we have entered this pact,” she called, “lend us thy great power now!”

He didn’t remember his parents. If he hadn’t known better, Chris would have sworn he’d never had any.

All tacticians in the Adamant Arrow, including Chris, were children who had been either abandoned or sold. Those who made it to the level of tactician had survived a long, brutal process of selection. The countless peers who failed the training process ended up in one place: the mass grave behind the training facility with a tombstone that read, “Here lie the fortunate losers.”

Well, Chris thought realistically, *it probably is better to die*. A tactician’s days were immersed in potentially fatal training activities. In order to proceed onto the next training level, he had to fight his peers, even the ones who had been kind to him. There was no one to protect him, obviously. No one to depend on. And if he died, no one would remember him.

Then again, what could one expect? Who would protect a boy if his own parents wouldn’t? Who would remember him if he killed half his teammates?

“Are you crying?”

Chris blinked. Furrowing his eyebrows, he turned to the girl beside him.

“Am I what?” he asked.

“Crying.”

The question made Chris pause, then give a short chuckle. Of course he wasn’t crying. He had long forgotten how, in order to learn more important skills.

“No,” he told her with a smile. “But sometimes, I wish I could.” He reached into a paper bag by his lap. “You must be hungry.”

The girl shrunk back from him. “No,” she said darkly.

“Really? Well, let me know when you are.” He pulled a roll the size of his fist from the bag. “I went to a bakery this afternoon and had one of these. They’re pretty good, so I bought a few extra for—”

“Stop it.”

Chris stared at her, confused. She suddenly looked extremely disturbed.

“Um... stop what?”

“This! All of this! You’re nothing but a killer!” The girl blinked tears from her eyes as she tucked her head against her chest. “You’re not a normal person,” she cried, “so stop acting like you are!”

Chris wasn’t sure what to say. Winia turned her head, and he could hear her sniff.

“You’re a murderer,” she whimpered shakily. “You came here to kill an innocent girl. So why are you... why do you look so...” She moaned weakly. “...Sad?”

Chris watched her turn away and said nothing. There was some strange feeling emanating from her, something in her hunched shoulders and shaking voice. He wasn’t quite sure what it was.

Is that...empathy? he wondered in disbelief. *Is this girl actually feeling some connection to me?*

It had been awhile since Chris had felt anyone direct such a feeling at him, so he wasn’t sure he was reading her right. After all, empathy coming from a hostage didn’t make any sense.

No. He was wrong—he had to be. She was just losing her nerve or babbling in a panic; either possibility was something he could handle.

Chris smiled wryly and returned the roll to its bag. “You’re something else,” he said. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

A long silence passed between them. After a minute, Chris could hear the girl take a long breath.

“When I was ten,” she began, her words slow and trembling, “I had a fight... with a very close friend.”

He raised an eyebrow skeptically. "You what?" he asked.

"He was a sick boy with a very kind heart. We played together all the time." She paused. "I have some... gypsy blood in me, so I was bullied a lot as a child. He wasn't healthy enough to play with the other boys, so he didn't mind making friends with a girl with mixed blood."

Gypsies. Vagrants. Chris knew them well—a >wandering people, largely made up of foreigners who migrated from the south, criminals, outcasts, and anyone else forced out of their hometown. To make a living, vagrants often took jobs that were generally considered "filthy."

A few decades earlier, vagrants had finally been recognized as members of society. The long-standing discrimination they had always suffered still existed, but not as overtly as it once had. The only people who didn't discriminate against vagrants were mercenaries, who had similar backgrounds.

"He was the son of a wealthy merchant, and his father and mother treated me like their own daughter. But then, one day..." She took another breath. "One day, I heard him say what he really felt about me."

Chris said nothing. He wanted to let her continue.

"He was being teased by the other boys, the ones from Sunday school. They accused him of having a crush on me since the two of us held hands." The girl dragged her knees along the gravel so she could tuck them nearer to her chest. "He said... he said he could never love a mutt. He was probably just saying it because he was embarrassed, but I was too young to know and too hurt to care. I stopped going to see him, and when he came with his butler to see me at my inn a few days later, I just threw dishes at him until he went away."

The girl hiccupped. "I trusted him, even though it was hard. He was the only real friend I'd ever had. So hearing him call me a *mutt*... I just couldn't forgive him." She pushed her forehead against the gravel. "He wrote me a

letter every day after that, but I threw them all into the fire. I couldn't even bear to open them."

An oppressive silence filled the space between Chris and the girl. He waited a moment, but when she said nothing, he tried to prompt her.

"Well?" he asked. "What's the point of all this? What are you trying to say?"

"I don't know," the girl hiccupped again. "I don't even know why I'm telling you this. It's just... seeing that sad look in your eyes, I almost think..." She sniffed. "You look the way that boy made me feel."

Chris, in a rare moment, could find no reason to smile. He let his eyes drop to the rocky canyon floor.

"Um..." He paused. "What, uh... happened after that?"

Winia turned, confused. "What did you just say?"

"What happened after that?" Chris made sure not to meet her eyes. "I'm just... curious."

She hesitated a moment. "We never made up," she said softly at last, her tone heavy with guilt. "He died from some sickness shortly after."

"Oh." Chris finally found himself able to craft his trademark smile. It was a small smile maybe, but he could manage it nonetheless. "Okay."

The girl stared at him in disbelief. "'Okay'?" she repeated.

Chris suddenly sensed a presence and got to his feet, happy that he didn't have to answer her.

"It looks like your knight in shining armor's here." Chris winked at her and picked up his axe. "No matter who wins, you'll be home before you know it."

Chris turned to see a solitary figure stepping into the Valley of Glass. The mosaic of reflected moonlight painted him with shards of white.

"Let me rephrase that." Chris glanced back at the girl and smiled. "Your knight in *leather* armor."

Pacifica clenched her fists so hard her knuckles turned white. Hunched in her chair, she squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth.

They can't die, she thought. *They can't.*

She wanted to pray, but she couldn't. If God really was Mauser, Pacifica wasn't in any position to have her prayers answered. So she just hoped; she hoped with every fiber of her being that her friend and her brother would come home alive.

Yet again, Pacifica was painfully aware of her own powerlessness. She couldn't fight, she couldn't use magic, and running or hiding only worked to a certain point. She was useless and she was helpless, and everyone she loved was in danger because of her.

She couldn't do anything. *Anything*. Anything except...

Pacifica jerked her head up and turned to a nearby bookshelf. A candlestick rested on top of it, its stub of a candle melted nearly to the base. The sharp blade that held the candle in place rose from the melted lumps like a sword piercing through flesh.

Pacifica swallowed and started to shake.

She was afraid to die—the mere thought of it made her quake with fear. But sometimes it seemed like an excellent solution, the fastest and most selfless way for her to end everyone's troubles. Whenever she was alone, Pacifica did her best not to look at any sharp objects. She didn't know if there would come a day when her fear of risking her family would override her fear of dying.

"Pacifica?"

Pacifica's eyes fell on the door beside the bookshelf. It opened with a mild creak, and Raquel's head appeared.

"Were you going to help me with dinner?" Raquel asked mildly.

"Right," Pacifica murmured, lurching to her feet. "I... I promised I would."

"Make dinner?" Raquel clarified.

“Make dinner,” Pacifica agreed.

Raquel smiled and opened the door wider in invitation.

Pacifica sighed. So she had to do what she always did, didn't she? Just wait around and have faith.

She sometimes wondered if dying could be as hard as having faith.

As Pacifica passed through the doorway, Raquel leaned farther into the room. Pacifica barely heard the sound of Raquel pushing the candlestick to the farther end of the bookshelf.

Chris was like a shadow puppet in the night, impossibly light and strangely beautiful. The glass-like surface of the canyon's walls had weathered over the years, and thus shattered at the slightest impact; fragments flew into the air, decorating the night with moonlit jewels.

“You don't know when to quit, do you?”

Shannon ducked under Chris' axe, then thrust his own blade. The two weapons met with a crash, deflected off each other, and continued in opposite directions. Chris followed the weight of his axe in a roundhouse attack, but Shannon arced up his sword in time to deflect.

Shannon barely had time to think. The blows he and Chris exchanged were powerful enough to kill a second or third-rate fighter, but neither of them could land a fatal slice. Shannon was equipped with attack magic, but Chris had greater flexibility and surprisingly superior physical strength. Both Shannon and his opponent were too afraid to try a bigger attack for fear of leaving themselves open for a counterstrike. They were getting nowhere fast.

“It's your fault for not finishing me off,” Chris retorted as he sliced from below. Shannon slid his sword over the axe's blade, then twisted hard to drag the axe up in a wide, harmless semicircle. When the weapons hit the top apex of the crescent, the two young men slammed against each other.

Chris smiled at Shannon over their grinding, locked weapons. "You should've killed me when you had the chance, Shannon Casull."

Shannon scowled. "You're right," he replied irritably. "I'm starting to regret it."

Chris chuckled. He pushed harder against his axe, and Shannon felt his hands shake.

"I-I spared your life," Shannon said through gritted teeth. "Couldn't you at least use it for a worthier cause?"

"Are you kidding? What's worthier than saving the world from destruction?" Chris still smiled, but his cold eyes darkened. "I don't understand you people. And all your hypocrisy is starting to piss me off."

Shannon furrowed his eyebrows. "Hypocrisy?"

"Don't you see it? You're protecting someone who's supposed to end the world, but you'll risk your life to save a kidnapped acquaintance. Why bother when your princess is going to end her life anyway?"

Shannon didn't answer, and his silence seemed to bother Chris.

"What the hell are you trying to accomplish? You don't have the guts to kill anybody, and you won't let anyone die, but you'll protect the Scrapped Princess? And I don't believe that crap about you killing her if you have to. You don't have the courage for that, Shannon, and you know it." Chris sneered uncharacteristically. "Is this just one giant exercise in self-gratification? You want to play the heroic big brother, no matter the cost!"

Shannon panted a moment, his fists trembling with the effort of keeping his sword locked. "Maybe," he murmured at last.

Chris' expression stiffened as he shoved against his battleaxe. The force of the blow knocked Shannon out of the weapon lock. He staggered back a few steps.

"I can't stand your hypocrisy!" Chris cried as he swung his axe at Shannon. Shannon barely pulled out of the way,

letting the axe graze his armor.

"You don't have a plan, and you don't have a moral high ground! It's all crap and it makes me sick!" Chris raised his axe over his head, priming himself for a killing blow.

Shannon tightened his grip on his sword.

Winia was hallucinating. She had to be. The clashing of weapons filled her ears, but she couldn't watch the battle. Her eyes were already locked on the something else.

An infant lay on the ground, curled and hugging its knees. It made no attempt to move out of the shadows that swallowed it—why would it, when it had been betrayed by the people it trusted the most? The child could believe nothing, trust no one, and feel no affection. Only a desperate loneliness remained in its heart.

"N-no," Winia croaked. "You can't... you can't come here. You have to go."

But the child didn't move. It had no desire to, just as it felt only a weak desire to breathe.

Winia began to shake. She glimpsed the child's face from time to time... sometimes it looked like Chris, and sometimes it looked like her. She squirmed against her bonds.

"You have to go," she implored weakly. "Please, get up!"

The child only raised its head. Its dry eyes focused on the glittering canyon lights. The child's heart had grown used to sadness and resignation; the infant was too afraid to reach for the light.

Winia was certain she was hallucinating—there was no other explanation for what she saw. But as she stared at that child, her wrists writhing against her bonds, all she could think of was what that child needed.

You just... She quickly shut her eyes. You just need someone, don't you? Just one human being!

Tears squeezed out from under Winia's eyelids. She needed to trust someone. She needed a bond with someone

that transcended common sense. Someone who would stand by her in the darkness, regardless of the reason; someone who would defend her even if the *world* turned against her.

Someone.

She opened her teary eyes. The child had vanished, but Chris was shouting at Shannon. Chris raised his , battleaxe over his head.

STOP IT! Winia's mind begged. *THIS ISN'T THE ANSWER!*

Chris didn't hate Shannon and his sisters. He just thought he did.

"You're just... just jealous of Pacifica!" Winia screamed before she could even think the words.

At that moment, as her cry rang through the Valley of Glass, Christopher Armalite paused.

Shannon took the opportunity.

"Valkyrie," he hissed, "grant your blessing!"

Shannon saw Chris' eyes widen, but he couldn't dwell on it as the repeating spell overtook him. Shannon gritted his teeth as other consciousnesses within his own mind opened up.

Do it.

Do it!

It's almost...

Raquel had magically created an emulator within Shannon—another personality that controlled Shannon's ' untapped magical capacity. It was a very dangerous technique, one that ran the risk of driving Shannon mad, but it allowed him to use magic without being a sorcerer. Raquel had been hesitant. Shannon didn't blame her.

The fact that the spell was a high-speed repeating spell only made matters worse. Since such a spell was like multitasking several spells at once and required pre-registering, it had formed *another* emulator. Shannon was holding three personalities in his head.

Almost...

Don't lose it!

DON'T LOSE HIM!

He saw confidence in Chris' eyes. Although a repeating spell could be activated with a quick, short mantra, it still had to be aimed accurately. It was the reason attack magic wasn't suited for close combat. At their distance, the axe was a quicker blow.

Chris wielded his weapon, its blade glinting in the moonlight. Shannon grunted and arced up his sword to defend.

CLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLANG!

The terrible sound of tearing metal echoed through the canyon. Shannon watched as his father's sword sliced through the younger boy's axe.

Chris' shock slowed him, and the weapon jerked out of his hands. Shannon took the opportunity to flip his blade over and slam the blunt edge into Chris' stomach.

Chris choked. The force of the blow knocked him back a step and forced him to his knees. He gripped his stomach, panting, before collapsing onto the floor.

The emulators left Shannon's consciousness so fast he nearly fainted. He closed his eyes and sucked in deep breaths, taking the moment to reassert his own personality.

Thanks, Raquel.

Shannon heard his young opponent groan; he opened his eyes to see the boy twisted on the ground. Shannon walked over to Chris and pushed the sharp edge against the tactician's neck.

"You lose," he said flatly.

Chris' eyes locked with Shannon's. "I can see that," he retorted.

Shannon scowled. The fight had been too close, and he knew his success was only because of the Blessed Blade, Raquel's modified version of a rarely used combat support spell. Originally developed by sorcerers who feared

close combat, the spell increased the speed of a sword and created an invisible, rapidly vibrating simulated blade that could cut through steel. It did little to help a fighter who couldn't properly use a sword, but in Shannon's hands, it was a godsend.

Even a well-forged battleaxe was doomed against a Blessed Blade. Thick steel armor and castle walls split like butter to its power.

"G-get on with it," Chris ordered, breathing heavily. "This is it, isn't it? You have to kill me this time."

Shannon stared at the tactician glittered with gravel shards.

After a long moment, Shannon let out a breath. "Believe me," he muttered. "I'm *really* sick of fighting you. And the only reason I'm alive is because of my sister's new spell. But..." He slowly pulled his blade from Chris' neck. He paused a moment, then tiredly returned the weapon to its sheath.

"I can't kill you. Killing someone to protect Pacifica would make her the walking doom the prophecy says she is." He shook his head. "She'd blame herself. And we're not going down that road."

Chris stared at Shannon, which made him so uncomfortable he had to avert his eyes.

"We decided not to kill anyone. And we won't let anyone kill. Call it stupid or hypocritical or whatever you think it is, but that's the way we're doing it." He sighed. "So you live another day, you infuriating little creep."

Having said his piece, Shannon headed for Winia. He half-expected Chris to attack him from behind, but the attack never came.

"You beat me," Chris said, his voice very quiet. "Honestly this time. I swear to God, I lose."

Shannon furrowed his eyebrows in annoyance. "Then I hope that means I never see you again," he grumbled.

Several human figures lay sprawled and bleeding in the darkness. All were men of strong physique, short hair and plain gray overcoats. They looked oddly humble for warriors, yet no other trait stood out save for one thing: their chilling uniformity.

The Purgers. The sixth and publicly-denied external affairs agency of the Mauser faith headquarters. But despite their power, they had been crushed. In addition to any injuries they had sustained in battle, each and every one of them had had their kneecaps shattered.

“You were defeated?”

The men slowly looked up. Their brazen faces ordinarily showed no emotion, yet now they were clearly exhausted and afraid.

A beautiful shadow stood in a blazing light. Slowly, deliberately, the shadow turned its head toward the fallen Purgers.

The Purgers trembled. As those who carried out divine punishment, they were not permitted to lose. A loss by the servants of Mauser shook the absoluteness of God. The men had given up everything in exchange for their strength—a loss denied the very reason for their existence.

More than any wound, the defeat tore at them.

“The Guardians are stronger than I expected.” The silhouette paused. “I didn’t plan to intervene directly, but now I have no choice. The military doesn’t seem to understand what must be done.”

The obscurity calmly looked up at the sky. “In addition,” it went on, “a loathsome foreign entity from the old world is waking. If it gets involved in this matter, things will be significantly complicated.”

The veiled creature stretched out its right hand. “I will grant you real power, Purgers. By the power of our Lord Mauser, the creator of all things, you will now become one.”

Its voice changed slightly in tone, almost as if it were singing. "I am a servant to Mauser," it chanted. "In the name of the fourth Peacemaker, Galil, I grant thee a miracle. Rejoice! You will now shed the shell of your human existence."

The dim entity grabbed the face of one of the Purgers and sunk its fingers deep into his flesh. With a flick of tiny movement, those fingers reached the brain.

"Rejoice, rejoice! This is your second birth!"

The Purger's eyes went white. His face was overwhelmed with the look of the rapture.

A few moments later, the cry of a newborn filled the night air.





The Weak

Shannon and Pacifica stood in the middle of the street. The sun shone high in the sky; a gentle breeze drifted between the buildings. On such a beautiful day, the roads should have been bustling with people.

But there was no bustle. In fact, not a single person shared the street with the Casulls. Even the shops that lined the roads had their doors closed and their windows barred.

“So... I guess they’re avoiding us,” Pacifica commented.

Shannon looked around. He could sense the townspeople hidden inside the buildings. He even caught glimpses of a few of them watching him when they thought his eyes were elsewhere. Pacifica was right—they were definitely being avoided on purpose.

The two siblings looked at each other. “What did you do?” Pacifica accused him.

“Me? I was going to ask you the same question.”

“You’re the one who’s always screwing up!”

Shannon sighed. “You’re kidding, right?”

The two argued for a few moments, then trailed off into an awkward silence. Someone usually showed up when they argued, either to stop the fight or distract Pacifica enough for her to give up.

In reality, Shannon had a pretty good idea why the townspeople’s attitude toward them had changed. Pacifica probably did, too. They just didn’t want to think about it.

“I doubt we can get any shopping done today,” Shannon said evenly. “We should probably just head home.” He turned back the way they had come.

“What? But...”

“We don’t have a choice. We could drag these people out of their homes and ask them what’s happening, but I have a feeling that would only make matters worse.”

Pacifica raised her eyes to her brother, her forehead creased in worry.

“Um... are you mad, Shannon?”

Shannon let out a breath. “Recently,” he murmured, “I’ve decided not to get angry when it doesn’t do any good. But I haven’t figured out what to do about feeling sad.”

Pacifica kept her eyes on the road. “I know what you mean,” she said softly, then grabbed hold of his sleeve. The two of them walked home in silence.

Winia peeled potatoes in her partially repaired kitchen. She hummed quietly to herself, lost in her thoughts.

She finally knew the true identities of her tenants. At first it had come as an understandable shock—the Scrapped Princess was legendary, a half-believed creature of unspeakable evil. No average country girl expected to be involved in such a tale.

However, once she’d had time to think things over, she realized that she didn’t care who the siblings were or what they ran from. Her feelings for the three of them hadn’t changed. This realization made her... glad, really. And oddly proud.

This time, she thought, I’m not going to run away.

“Winia,” called a shaking voice. Winia looked up.

In the doorway stood her grandmother, Felicia Chester. The old woman’s face was worn with age and illness. She was wrapped in a warm stole to block out the chill, and one hand rested on the doorframe for support.

Winia was surprised to see her grandmother in the kitchen. She rarely had the strength to leave her bed, let alone walk down the hallway.

“Grandma, are you feeling all right? I didn’t expect to see you up and about.” Winia hurried over to help the old

woman to her chair.

“Yes, dear, I’m fine. I feel better than usual today.”

Despite her claims, the woman seemed unusually frail to Winia, who had to help her to a chair.

Winia frowned. “Is something wrong, Grandma?” she asked. “You’ve been taking that medicine Doctor Randall brought, right?”

The doctor was a frequent visitor at the inn. Since Winia’s family was too poor to pay for regular doctor visits, they had worked out an arrangement where the doctor would come whenever it was most convenient for him, and in exchange, he only charged the bare minimum of expenses. His visits averaged about once a week.

“I’ve taken it, my dear. But my health isn’t what we need to be concerned with right now.” She gave her granddaughter a piercing look.

The expression worried Winia greatly.

“Those three guests...” the old woman began.

“You mean the Casulls?”

“Yes. You must ask them to leave tomorrow. No, it would be better if they left today.”

Winia stared at her grandmother in shock. “What?” she breathed.

A pebble bounced on the cobblestones.

Shannon and Pacifica looked in the direction from where it came. A shadowy figure stood in an alley, beckoning them over.

When they moved closer, Shannon recognized the figure as Michelle from the bakery. Pacifica recognized her as well, and was about to call to her when Shannon grabbed the girl, covered her mouth, and pulled her into the alley.

“Michelle—” Shannon began, but the girl wouldn’t let him finish.

“—Something really strange is going on.”

“I know,” Shannon replied. “Is there anything you can tell us about it?”

Michelle looked at him incredulously. “You don’t know why this is happening?”

Shannon furrowed his eyebrows. “I can think of too many reasons.”

Michelle sighed. “Basically,” she explained, “people have been spreading rumors about you three. Really nasty things, too—that you’re on the run because you killed a Mauser official and Shannon raped and murdered some girl a few towns over and Raquel and Pacifica helped him cover it up, or that you’re a gang of sibling serial killers looking for your next victims.”

Pacifica’s jaw nearly hit the alley floor. “That’s awful!” she squeaked.

Shannon sent Michelle a measuring glance. “In that case,” he asked slowly, “are you okay with talking to us cold-blooded killers?”

Michelle shrugged. “I wouldn’t, if the rumors weren’t a bunch of lies.”

The confidence in her voice surprised Shannon. He hadn’t been expecting a mere acquaintance to have such faith in him.

“Um... how can you be sure?” he tried.

“Oh, I know a thing or two about people and how these things tend to work, and these rumors are spreading way too fast for ordinary word-of-mouth. And they’re really inconsistent—I mean, how many different crimes could you three have committed? It doesn’t make any sense that a bunch of completely different rumors would come up all at once.” Michelle looked him straight in the eye. “I think someone is spreading these rumors intentionally.”

Shannon sighed. “Yeah, that wouldn’t surprise me.”

Michelle put her hands on her hips. “So?” she asked. “What are you going to do?”

Shannon paused a moment. Then, finally, he rubbed his eyes. “Nothing,” he answered tiredly. “There isn’t anything we can do that’ll make this better. Even if we deny everything, I doubt anyone will believe us.”

He noticed Pacifica look away. *But it’s the truth*, he thought. *Even if it upsets her*.

Shannon glanced at Michelle. “Thank you,” he said. “But it’s time we left here, anyway.”

“An information battle?” Chris looked up at his superior curiously.

“Yes. Although due to lack of time, we were only able to execute a crude one.” Luke’s steely gaze took in the town stretched out beneath them. “Fortunately, it doesn’t seem like information about the Scrapped Princess has leaked to the townspeople.”

Chris felt a chill run down his spine. There was in fact one person who knew about Pacifica’s background—the girl from the inn, Winia. Chris hadn’t reported her. He couldn’t explain it properly (even to himself), but letting her go just felt like the right thing to do.

Chris pursed his lips and decided to keep his silence. But the whole experience was unsettling—not only had Shannon defeated him *twice* in combat, but now Chris was withholding information from his superiors.

“As the rumors spread,” Luke explained, “the townspeople will become convinced that those siblings are killers. Even if someone finds out the truth about the princess, they’ll just think it is an exaggeration and will most likely fall back on the more consistent rumors.” He crossed his arms. “With the people turned against them, it’s likely that the Casull siblings will be driven out of town before too long. It will be much simpler to take care of them on the road, away from witnesses.

“According to our reports,” he went on, “the Casulls have impressive combat skills but lack experience with the

psychological toll of battle. Their morale will likely be low if they're forced to leave town, which will lessen their drive and thus keep casualties on our side to a minimum. We've posted personnel on all likely departure routes."

Chris stared at the man, surprised. He didn't consider himself a particularly honorable fighter, and in order to fulfill his duty over the years he'd taken hostages, exploited weaknesses, and looked for every tactical advantage. But it would have never occurred to him to go to such great lengths to weaken an enemy.

However, Luke had already said that his main goal was to keep casualties at a minimum, both soldiers and civilians. That alone made moral arguments against his plan seem unjust.

"Well?" Luke didn't bother turning to Chris. "What are you going to do? Return now and report to your superiors, or stay and see how the mission is carried out?"

Chris took a breath. "I have orders from the baroness to observe the mission to the end," he said evenly. "Regardless of success or failure."

"I'm sorry."

Surprised, Winia looked up. *Who's there?* she wondered.

In a horrendous turn of luck, Raquel stood in the doorway. And from the look on her face, she had heard the conversation between Winia and her grandmother.

Winia's stomach sank. Her grandmother's words had been hard for *her* to hear, she couldn't imagine how painful they were for Raquel. Winia had been hoping that she, at the very least, could have been the one to break the news to the Casulls.

"Raquel..." she began.

Raquel shook her head. "It's all right," she assured Winia softly. "As soon as Shannon returns, we'll leave. I promise we'll come back with money for the repairs as soon as we can."

“You don’t have to leave. My grandmother just believed those silly rumors—”

“It’s okay.” Raquel smiled faintly. “Really.”

Winia swallowed hard. She’d heard the rumors that called the Casull siblings murderers and worse, but knowing the three of them as she did, she couldn’t imagine anyone believed the tales. Still, Shannon always carried a sword with him, and it was a well-known fact that Raquel had used attack magic in town—not to mention that Winia had been kidnapped in front of everyone. With so much danger and violence surrounding them, Winia reluctantly realized that rumors were to be expected.

“I’m not surprised that this happened.” Raquel carefully folded her hands in front of her. “We’ll be fine. Just promise me that you’ll make up with your grandmother.”

“I know, I know. It’s just that...” Winia trailed off into silence, unable to continue.

In the end, Winia had refused her grandmother’s wishes, which had been so shocking to the old woman that she hobbled away, her head dropped in despair.

Winia looked to the floor and narrowed her eyes. Anger welled up inside her, pushing aside the depression in her heart.

“Why are people so stupid?” she asked. “They have eyes, and ears, and minds. How could they let this happen?!”

Why don’t people think for themselves?!

Raquel slowly pulled Winia into her arms. “Most people aren’t that strong,” she said softly. “It’s hard to know what to think sometimes. It’s human nature to believe what’s easiest—that’s not really wrong in itself, it’s just the way things are.”

Winia hiccupped. Hot tears welled up in her eyes, and she wiped them away with her sleeve.

“Then I... I want to be strong. I want the strength to believe in people, no matter what happens.”

Raquel smiled sadly. “Strength alone doesn’t solve anything, Winia. Some people don’t see their own mistakes because their strength blinds them. Some people have absolute faith in their beliefs, but use that to hurt others.” Raquel gently stroked Winia’s hair. “I don’t know who’s right or wrong, or even if it really matters. I’m just glad that I met you and the people of this town. That’s enough for me.”

Winia hiccupped again. Her view of the floor blurred as new tears filled her eyes.

“Hey!” A hoarse whisper caught the attention of the five soldiers of Team 6. Their team leader, who had made the sound, gestured at a figure walking down the road toward them.

Team 6 was one of seven Blackhawk units deployed to detain anyone leaving or entering Taurus. Any travelers, whether or not they had anything to do with the Scrapped Princess, were to be held for five days while the mission was carried out. If it could be determined that the townspeople knew too much, the Blackhawks would descend to kill every last civilian.

Of course, precautions had been taken so that the last resort wouldn’t be necessary. Teams 1 and 2 had infiltrated the city to spread rumors about the Scrapped Princess and her siblings and thus drive the three of them out of town.

Although the Blackhawk soldiers generally tried to avoid slaughtering civilians, if they had to, destroying an innocent town was preferable to allowing the world to know that the Scrapped Princess lived. The political instability that would result when the Mauser Church realized that the royal family had spared the princess—as well as neighboring countries’ reactions when they found out that Linevan had allowed the girl who would destroy the world to survive—could be enough to tear the entire country apart.

The soldiers of Team 6 were not about to take risks. They readied their weapons as the figure drew closer.

The man who approached was abnormally large, with a normal-sized head that seemed strangely comical attached to his huge body. His hair was short, and his bland eyes stared forward resolutely.

The soldiers exchanged glances. They recognized the man from their briefing documents.

“Is that... a Purger?” one soldier whispered, obviously doubting what he saw.

The documentation had stated that Purgers always operated in teams of four. Not only that, but the Purgers misshapen body was a surprise—the team’s information on Purgers had described them as completely normal men with an unusual similarity. A single, huge Purger returning to the scene of his defeat made their information oddly inaccurate.

The team leader raised his thumb, then pointed it downward—the Blackhawk signal for “handle according to standard procedure.” The soldiers quickly and silently surrounded the Purger on all sides.

A sudden, strange, rasping noise made them pause. They looked around in confusion before focusing back on the Purger. A chill went down the leader’s spine as he realized what the sound was.

Laughter.

Purgers were supposed to have abandoned all traces of humanity to carry out their faith. For one to be laughing made no sense at all, yet the large Purger smiled brightly as his shoulders shook with mirth.

Suddenly, his face twisted.

The soldiers reacted instinctively. Some jumped out of the way, others threw up their weapons to block; all the movements had a swiftness born of intense training. But for those who stood their ground, even their considerable battle experience couldn’t save them.

The Purger’s humanoid form abruptly split apart, sending new limbs bursting from his body. The arms

were abnormally long and had more than one joint. They shot out of his face, his back, and his knees, shredding his clothes as they reached for the soldiers. In barely a moment, two soldiers were gripped in the monster's grotesque hands.

The leader had managed to dive out of the way. He threw his gaze up to see that the Purger had sprouted a total of eight arms, likening him to a giant deformed spider. As the leader watched, the last of the Purger's shirt ripped away and a cheerfully laughing human face popped out from the Purger's chest.

The monster opened its mouth. The leader expected to hear a terrible roar, but instead the creature spoke in a strangely normal voice.

"Ha ha! This truly is bliss! We always thought we knew true unity, but that was only a pale shadow compared to this new oneness!" The Purger surveyed the soldiers surrounding him.

"Lonely creatures!" he announced. "I will share my joy with you!"

Without another word, the monster dragged one of the soldiers close and sank an arm into his face.

The soldier's scream was cut off as the Purger's arm plunged into his flesh. But instead of it resulting in a bloody mess, the arm merged with the soldier's head, blurring the outlines of Purger and man into each other. The arm holding the soldier then sank into the man's body.

The soldier started to convulse. His body melted out of its shape, and strange rents in his flesh opened up. The gashes quickly grew teeth, lips, and tongues, covering the man in perfectly shaped human mouths. Barely a second after they had formed, the mouths started laughing.

The soldier desperately reached out for his comrades with the last part of his body that was still recognizable: an arm. The other men could do nothing but watch as the creature engulfed this last appendage.

The most battle-hardened instinct inside the leader forced him to snap out of his horror. “D-disperse!” he managed to shout to his men and he scrambled to his feet.

The soldiers tried to scatter backward, but it was too late. More hands shot out of the Purger and grabbed each of the men.

A small face popped up in one of the Purger’s palms.

“Now,” the face drawled, “we become one. There is no longer fear, or pain... only bliss.”

The face smiled happily as the soldiers screamed and screamed.

It was happening again.

Winia stood in the corner of the room as the Casull siblings packed their things. She wrung her hands, licked her lips, and otherwise did whatever she could to keep her feelings locked inside.

She could remember standing in that very spot after the four assassins had attacked, wishing there was something she could do to make the Casulls stay.

“It’s like deja vu,” Pacifica said, laughing a bit as she loaded a large bag into the coach. She turned to face Winia. “I know I said it before, but... well, I’m sorry, Winia.”

Winia shook her head and said nothing. She was sure that if she opened her mouth she would start crying, and she could tell that Pacifica was trying hard to act like nothing was wrong.

“We’ll come back when we can to give you money for the repairs, but I don’t know how soon that’ll be. I hope you’ll only charge us a little bit of interest, though ...I mean—”

Shannon cut in. “Don’t try to weasel out of your debts,” he muttered.

Pacifica spun around to face him. “Hey!” she snapped. “You’re the one who destroyed the wall in the first place! I’m trying to be a kind sister and apologize on your behalf!”

“Hey,” a quiet voice called.

Winia looked up. Safir Colt appeared from around the corner of a building, a small bundle gripped in his hands. He walked over to where the siblings loaded their coach.

"I was afraid this would happen," he mumbled. "Are you really leaving?"

Raquel bowed politely. "Thank you for everything, Mister Colt."

Safir frowned. Winia was relieved to see neither fear nor hatred in his face. If anything, she thought she saw regret.

"I'm really sorry to see you go," he said quietly. "But by this time tomorrow, the citizen's patrol will drive you out of town. I don't know where those rumors began, but now that everything's gone this far anyway, I think you're making the right decision to leave before the townspeople come after you. It'll be better for everyone this way."

The innkeeper sighed. Carefully, he unwrapped the package resting in his arms.

"This is a farewell gift. If it won't be in your way, I hope you'll take it on your travels."

Inside was an old lute, the same one Shannon had played at the Wild Horse Inn. It had obviously seen a lot of use over the years—the body of the instrument was scratched and worn, but the important parts were in excellent shape. Safir handed the instrument to Raquel.

"Iris has been saying that she wants a new one," Safir explained. "I'm sorry it's used, but I thought you might get good use out of it."

In a surprising moment, Winia saw clear, painful longing in Shannon's dark eyes. Raquel handed Shannon the lute, and he cradled it in his hands.

Safir shook his head. "I don't know what you're fighting against, but I do know that you shouldn't cut ties with your past. It's easy to throw away your dreams and hopes and memories. But a person needs more than just a sword to live."

Shannon looked up, his forehead creased. "Safir..."

“Don’t give up on the everyday world. Do what you have to do, fight the battles you have to fight, just don’t become a person whose life is nothing but violence and death.”

Shannon took a breath, then smiled a faint, tired smile.

“Thanks,” he said quietly. “I’ll remember that.”

Luke stared at the paper that a subordinate held out to him. He furrowed his eyebrows at the soldier.

“A message from the capital?”

“Yes, sir.”

Luke took the offered letter. “Zard,” he read at loud. “Emergency message for all units—temporarily freeze current mission. Orders to para-combat dispatch teams three and six: in the case of an encounter with the Scrapped Princess, note change in orders from ‘Procedure 1, Eliminate’ to ‘Procedure 2, Surveillance.’ Please modify tactics accordingly.”

Chris raised his eyebrows. “Freeze the mission?” he repeated in surprise.

“It seems my concerns were well-founded,” Luke commented without looking up. “The leadership is divided over the handling of the Scrapped Princess. I’ve heard that even within senior headquarters there is an increasing number of officials who support capturing the princess over her elimination.”

Chris nodded. He had shared his superior’s concerns of a divided headquarters.

“It seems that even the Church has learned about this development. They’ve sent off a secret document, signed by Royal Chamberlain himself, ordering that this whole town be eliminated.”

Chris blinked. “What?” he blurted. “I certainly hope you’re kidding, sir.”

Luke shrugged. “We were prepared to do the same, so this shouldn’t come as a surprise. Whatever we do, it’s clear that the military, the Church, and the royal family are no

longer working toward the same goals. We have to handle this situation carefully or we may end up fighting the Church's forces."

Chris paused to think about the new information.

"Understood," he murmured at last. "Should I go to one of the teams and inform them of the change in orders?"

Luke nodded. "That would be helpful."

"Colonel!"

One of the Blackhawk soldiers ran toward Luke, stumbling as he went. It was an unusual sight—the Black-hawks were trained to deal calmly with any situation, yet the soldier was obviously panicked. When he stopped to clutch his chest in an attempt to catch his breath, Chris could see that he was shaking.

Luke clearly didn't approve. "What's going on, Slay?" he asked. "Get ahold of yourself."

"Sir! It's... an emergency!" The soldier gasped for air and nearly choked on his words. "The men... all dead... the Purger..." He trailed off, his face contorted with fear.

Luke's blue eyes narrowed.

The carriage passed through the gate, leaving the town of Taurus behind.

Pacifica twisted in her seat. She obviously wanted to catch one last glimpse of the town they'd grown so fond of, but Shannon knew it wasn't a good idea.

He touched her arm. "Don't look back," he said, his voice unusually gentle. "It'll just make this harder."

Pacifica turned back in the direction they were headed, her face falling. "You're probably right," she mumbled, looking down at her toes.

"Pacifica."

"Yeah?"

"Get inside the cabin."

An arrow suddenly flew through the air, straight for the back of Pacifica's head; Shannon lunged and managed to

catch it before it reached its target. He shoved his sister into the cabin and discarded the arrow.

“Hey!” Shannon shouted into the scenery that hid the attackers. “I’m having a pretty crappy day. If you’re planning to attack me, you’d better be prepared for the worst.”

In response, arrows soared out of the woods from multiple directions. There were at least four archers in the brush, if not more.

“Wall, defend!” Raquel’s voice rang out from the passenger cabin, activating the defensive spell Midgard. Shining geometric patterns surrounded the carriage and horses, deflecting every arrow.





Shannon cracked the whip. “We’re going straight through!” he called back.

The barrier disappeared. Without knowing what kind of enemies they faced, Shannon knew that Raquel needed to reserve her magical strength.

Shannon urged the horses onward. He wanted to get as far away from the ambush as possible. But before he could get very far, three men with daggers burst from the nearby thicket and leapt for the carriage.

Shannon managed to kick one of the men away, but the other two scrambled onto the carriage. One jumped onto the driver’s box, the other on the passenger cabin.

“Dammit!” Shannon cursed. He quickly drew his sword.

In the confines of the driver’s box, Shannon couldn’t make full use of his sword—a dagger’s short range was far more effective. And Raquel couldn’t use destructive magic on an enemy who clung to the Casulls’ only means of transportation. The opponent had outsmarted Shannon and given themselves a major advantage.

“Who are you?” Shannon hissed. The man wore a black mask over his face, and his clothes had no insignia or markings that Shannon could see.

Instead of answering, the man lunged at him with his dagger.

Shannon swiftly brought his sword around to block the blade. Unfortunately, the driver’s box wasn’t big enough for the maneuver Shannon had in mind; the sword lodged itself in the wall of the passenger cabin with a *thunk*.

“Argh!” Unable to block the dagger, Shannon had no choice but to drop his sword and duck. Despite his efforts, the dagger still sliced through his shoulder.

Shannon’s abandoned sword slid out of the wooden cabin wall and clattered off the carriage. Before Shannon knew what was happening, his beloved heirloom was gone.

“Impressive,” the man muttered. “Few swordsmen are willing to drop a weapon, even if it is a hindrance.”

Shannon jammed his hand under the driver's seat and pulled out a short sword he kept there for emergencies. "Shut up," he snapped.

Both men moved at the same moment. The dagger and short sword met with a clash and locked together; both fighters pushed against their weapons in an attempt to overpower their opponent. Shannon abruptly forced his blade forward and twisted it. The masked man managed to avoid the blade but lost his balance, and Shannon drove his knee into the man's gut.

For a moment it seemed like the masked man would fall, but he slammed his dagger into the wall of the passenger cabin and used it to anchor himself to the swiftly moving coach. The move jerked the man out of the way of Shannon's short sword, and by the time Shannon had a chance to attack again, the man had already pulled himself onto the roof of the cabin to join his comrade.

Shannon hoped Raquel had a spell prepared, but he couldn't think of anything that would be very effective in such close quarters. Defensive magic could work, but using offensive magic in the cabin would most likely kill everyone.

The men grabbed the edges of the roof and prepared to kick in the glass windows from both sides. Shannon was too far away to stop them.

An instant before their feet hit the windows, the glass burst out from the inside. Small steel pellets slammed into the men's ankles and knocked them off-balance. Both men barely managed to catch themselves before they fell.

The rear door of the cabin opened, and Raquel's head and torso appeared over the edge of the roof. She wore strange mechanical contraptions on both her wrists: compatible bows, special high-powered weapons that could launch arrows or steel pellets with great speed. Although her first attack had been through a glass window (and hence had a reduced level of force), even the non-lethal pellets could inflict serious injury at close range.

Raquel smiled. "Just because I'm a sorceress doesn't mean I always attack with sorcery," she said brightly. The bows on her wrists were still pointed at each of the men.

Shannon jumped onto the cabin's roof. He knew they had to end the battle quickly, simply because he didn't know how much longer the coach would stay upright without a driver. The stretch of road was mercifully straight, but the carriage could still tip over at any moment.

Under Raquel's watchful gaze, neither man moved. They seemed surprised, but Shannon knew that wouldn't last long. The men were dangerous, too dangerous for either Shannon or Raquel to take on alone. He suddenly realized there was only one option left.

"Pacifica!" he shouted. "Take over as driver!"

"What?!" Surprised, Pacifica poked her head out of the window behind the driver's box. "B-but I've never driven before!" she spluttered.

"Just hold the reins! You're better than nothing!"

Pacifica climbed through the window and tentatively took the reins. Shannon prayed she could handle the task without killing them all.

"So?" Shannon asked, focusing back on the masked men. "What's it gonna be? I'd really like to end this so I can go back for my father's sword."

Shannon's original opponent growled. "I don't recall going easy on you," he snapped, "but I suppose we weren't prepared to take on a trained fighter."

"I don't recall going easy on *you*, but I suppose I was just used to all the flunkies we've faced." Shannon glanced sideways at Pacifica, then felt the color abruptly drain from his face. His sister had apparently overcome her nervousness and was squealing in delight as she swung the reins wildly.

Don't panic, he told himself in an attempt to calm down. *Just win, then get those reins the hell out of her hands.*

Before Shannon could make his attack, a horse suddenly appeared beside the speeding carriage. The horseman jumped out of the saddle with impressive agility; his gray overcoat spread out behind him as he soared through the air and landed gracefully beside Pacifica.

He smiled at Shannon, who resisted the urge to scream in frustration.

"Y-you!" was all Shannon managed to choke out.

Christopher Armalite winked at a perplexed Pacifica. "Let me do that," he said as he took the reins from Pacifica's unresisting hands.

"Er," she began, confused. "What are you—?"

"For now, we're not enemies." In a display of his peculiar strength, Chris pulled the reins tight. The horses—frightened by the fighting—seemed to regain their sense and eventually slowed the carriage to a stop.

Chris stood upon the seat and spoke in a loud, clear voice without turning to look at the fighters on the roof.

"I have a message from Colonel Sturm," he called. "Code Crimson 0037. He told me you would understand what that meant."

The masked men exchanged a quick glance. In one fluid motion, they sheathed their weapons and pulled out thin chains with weights on the end, which they then threw into the trees to the side of the road. Before Shannon could even make a move, the men swung into the trees and were lost in the forest.

Shannon jumped back into the driver's box. "Hey!" he snapped. "Battleaxe kid! I thought I told you I never wanted to see you again."

"Please call me Chris," the boy said calmly.

Despite Chris' help, Shannon felt a growing urge to throttle the boy. *Haven't I had to beat him enough times already?* he wondered darkly. *And can this day possibly get any worse?*

“You want to tell me what’s going on here?” Shannon asked.

“Well, I can’t give you the details—they’re top secret. But I can tell you that the town is in chaos and that you better return.”

Pacifica’s eyes widened. “What happened to Taurus?!” she demanded.

Chris shrugged. “It looks like the Purgers have transformed into a crazy beast,” he said evenly. “They’re sucking in all sorts of things and growing bigger as we speak.”

Shannon opened his mouth to retort the ridiculous statement, but before he could speak a deafening roar pierced the air.

The three Casull siblings whipped toward the sound in shock. Above the familiar buildings of Taurus, giant tentacles swayed violently.

Those Who Break the Law

The carriage raced down the road so fast that it nearly left the ground altogether. At such a speed, with a carriage behind, a single misstep could result in death for both the horses and the wagon's passengers. Still, Shannon pushed the animals harder.

"I can't believe I got caught up with the Good Samaritan brigade," Chris sighed to himself as he sat carelessly on the carriage roof.

"Shut up," Shannon snapped, his gaze never leaving the road. "Nobody invited you."

"I figured I'd do you a favor and let you know what was going on. Would you have preferred for me to let that monster eat all your friends?"

Shannon didn't reply—he only urged the horses to run faster.

Without an answer, Chris continued. "Anyway, I wanted to see how you'd handle this. After that pompous speech you gave me the other day, if you'd turned tail and run I would've stabbed you in the back." Chris looked toward the town, where flailing tentacles of flesh were plainly visible above the buildings. "More important, do you think you really have a chance of beating that thing?"

"How can I know my chances when I don't even know what's going on?" Shannon curled his fingers over the reins. "If I can't beat it, at least I can create a diversion so the townspeople have time to evacuate."

"The townspeople who drove you out? Even if you save them, it's not like they'll appreciate it."

"You don't get it, do you? I'm not doing this to be thanked."

“And you’re going to put your life—and your sisters’ lives—on the line for those ungrateful people?”

“If you’ve got a *problem* with it,” Shannon hissed through gritted teeth, “you can get off now.” He jerked his head toward the road flying beneath them.

Chris smirked. “I’m going to enjoy watching this.”

“Shut up,” Shannon ordered darkly.

A child was crying. The little boy shrieked at the top of his lungs, calling for his parents. His tiny body shook as the sound echoed down the empty street.

Yet it would never reach the ears of his parents, who, had been unwillingly dragged away by the citizen’s patrol.

A fleshy tentacle, which was attached to a mass of twisted flesh as large as a house, wrapped itself around the child’s leg. It squirmed like a slug, heading slowly toward the center of town. The countless tentacles protruding from its mass shot down side streets and into buildings in search of prey.

Once a living creature touched the monster, there was no hope for survival. The creature destroyed the physical structure of living things and transformed them into anything it wished.

“Dad! Mommy! Daaaaaoooooorrrgh!” The child’s cries turned into a terrible roar as his body split in two. Red liquid oozed and splashed onto the cobblestones.

Common sense dictated that the boy would die. But somehow, even with his face split apart, the child continued to cry. “D-D-Dad... Ma...”

From the wide gash in the boy’s face, things started to grow. Eyes, ears, fingers, and other body parts emerged grotesquely before withering away. The tentacles finally drew what was left of the child toward its main mass of flesh.

The last part to disappear was the child’s ruined face, crying until the very end.

Chris stood up once the carriage finally stopped.

He and the Casulls had reached the outskirts of Taurus in record time, but continuing forward was going to be far more difficult - a net of closely woven tentacles stretched across the entire perimeter of the town. There was no way in or out that wasn't blocked by the monster.

"Chris." Shannon dropped the reins and stood.

"Yeah?"

"We're going to use a special technique to get through this barrier. Will you take the reins until we're clear?"

"Sure." Chris took Shannon's place in the driver's seat, and Shannon climbed to the top of the carriage and helped Raquel scramble up next to him.

Shannon met his sister's eyes. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"I am," she replied, looking around. "I don't sense any people nearby, so as long as we're careful with the range, full power should be fine."

Raquel's face locked into an expression of deep concentration as she started to cast a spell. "Though only temporarily," she called, "I hereby grant you..."

Chris recognized the spell—it was used to activate an emulator. Raquel could cast it to temporarily make Shannon a sorcerer. *So he wants to use magic?* Chris wondered.

Once the spell was completed, Shannon began his own.

"Heaven, Earth, and all things in between, I now grant you your end..."

While Shannon spoke, Raquel began to cast another spell, their voices musically overlapping.

"My hope, my wish, incarnate here..."

Something dawned on Chris as he listened to the spells. He widened his eyes, impressed.

Pacifica took that moment to lean out the window. "What's going on?" she asked him.

"Just watch," Chris said. He wanted to see if Shannon and Raquel could pull off what they were attempting.

“O, thou with whom we have entered this pact, lend us thy great power now!”

Shannon’s spell, the combat support magic Rune, finally activated.

“God and devil, now both be destroyed!”

A moment later, Raquel finished her own magic— the military attack spell Ragnarok.

Two intertwined spirals of white light burst upward and pierced the sky. A wave of intense heat and sound hit Chris, and then Pacifica, a moment later.

The net of flesh, as well as the town wall and a large chunk of the ground, were all blown to pieces. The light faded to reveal nothing but scattered debris.

“Wow!” Pacifica exclaimed, scanning the damage. “That was... awesome!”

Chris brushed a few pebbles from his coat. “So that was the real Ragnarok?”

Shannon sent Chris a glare before climbing off the roof. “I’m surprised you knew what it was,” he said thinly.

Chris smiled. “After you beat me that first time, I did some research.”

Ragnarok was a spell designed for two or more sorcerers. It had two parts: the actual offensive blast known as Ragnarok, and the support spell, Rune, which stabilized the blast and increased its strength and aim. When Ragnarok was cast along with its support spell, it had ten times the destructive power of the attack spell alone. A powerful group of sorcerers could destroy an entire fortress down to its foundation.

Pacifica suddenly cried out and pointed toward the monster. “Look!” she shouted.

The tentacles within the spell’s blast *had* been destroyed, and the ones on either side had momentarily stilled. But once it was clear that the explosive light was gone, the destroyed parts of the monster began regenerating at an incredible rate.

Chris pushed the horses to start galloping again and headed toward the center of one of the larger gaps in the monster's defenses.

"Keep that up," Shannon said as he drew his sword, "and we'll make it in time."

Sure enough, the wagon sped through the gap before it closed off behind them. Chris blinked in surprise as he pulled the horses to a walk.

The town had been completely seized by tentacles—all the familiar storefronts, streets, and well-kept homes covered with the fleshy limbs. The tentacles felt their way down every road and alley in search of new prey.

A tentacle suddenly shot out for the carriage from around a corner. Raquel threw up a hand.

"Wall, defend!" Raquel's voice rang out, activating the defense magic Midgard. The tentacle's end fizzled as the power globe deflected it.

Chris turned back to Shannon. "Now what?" he asked. "Should I head for the Big Bear Inn?"

Shannon shook his head. "Go to the Wild Horse Inn. That's where the citizen's patrol hangs out, and it's been designated as the evacuation area in case of an emergency. Everyone should be gathered there."

Chris nodded and cracked the whip.

"What the hell is that thing?" a townswoman whispered, her eye pressed against a chink in the window defenses.

Not one of the people crowded in the Wild Horse Inn replied—it was the one question no one could answer. The heavy silence that smothered the room was only broken by the sound of someone quietly sobbing.

"There's no way we can fight it. What are we going to do?"

Again, no one answered. There was no answer they could give.

After a few livestock had been absorbed by the monster, several members of the citizen's patrol had attacked the tentacles. They had managed to harm it somewhat with blades and fire, but the damaged parts grew back almost immediately. A member of the attack group had been absorbed in the process.

The tentacles had covered the entire town. At that point, nothing the townspeople could do would hurt the monster. Their only option was to hide in their homes or in evacuation areas and pile up furniture in front of the doors and windows.

Nobody believed that such a flimsy method of defense would last long.

"If only we had some powerful... magic," someone else whispered.

All at once, the townspeople suggested the same person.

"Raquel."

"Yes, that girl! I saw her using attack magic."

"She's a powerful sorcerer, isn't she?"

The speakers looked at each other, a faint glimmer of hope shining on their faces.

"Raquel and her siblings are gone," a quiet voice interrupted them. Winia shook in the corner, her face strangely contorted. She wrapped her arms around her waist and took a step forward.

"We made them leave," she said flatly. "Don't you remember? We talked about them behind their backs, avoided them, and never gave them a chance to prove their innocence."

Next to Winia was her grandmother, who grabbed her arm to try to quiet her. Winia just shook off the old woman's hand.

"All of you! You were so eager to think the worst of them, you just believed whatever you heard! And now you want them to save us?"

For a moment, the room went completely silent. Most of the people present had never heard Winia raise her voice before. Being chided by Winia was like being savagely attacked by a kitten—they probably weren't sure what to make of it.

"B-but, Winia," one member of the citizen's patrol stammered, "we all know Raquel used attack magic in the middle of town. And they fought with assassins!"

Several voices chimed in with agreements.

"Aren't those attack spells illegal?"

"And you were kidnapped because you got involved with them!"

"We all wanted to go save you, but Shannon stopped us. That sounds like they were trying to cover something up to me."

"Hey! Maybe they created that monster as revenge for being driven out of town!"

Winia couldn't believe what she was hearing. Tears of frustration welled in her eyes.

Raquel had told her that the weaknesses in human nature made people humble enough to admit their mistakes. But the citizens of Taurus were still trying to spread the blame, even after everything they'd done.

Was such a sickness in the human spirit a fact she would have to accept?

Something heavy hit the front door with a *thud*. The townspeople immediately fell silent, every set of eyes locked on the door, in terror.

The door began to rattle, like someone or something had a grip on the handle and was trying to jiggle it open. When the door didn't budge, it became still again.

"I think it's gone," a townspeople breathed at last.

"With this much stuff piled up, it would take an incredible force to get through—"

An incredible force ripped through the door and sent the pile of furniture flying into the far wall.

The people gripped whatever paltry weapons they had and prepared for the inevitable rush of tentacles. It never came. Instead, after the dust settled, a single stick poked in through the ruined doorway.

“Well, it’s certainly open now.” A wonderfully normal voice spoke from the other side of the ruined door. A moment later, two young men peeked their heads inside the room.

“Everyone okay in here?” one of them called out.



11



Winia squinted through the dust at the taller of the two figures. Her heart leapt when she realized who it was.

“Shannon?” she called out to him.

Shannon walked into the room with Chris in tow. Behind him, Winia could see that their carriage was parked so that it blocked the doorway, and a shimmering defensive spell surrounding it closed off all gaps a tentacle could pass through.

None of the townspeople moved. They still had weapons gripped in their hands, and their faces wore expressions of hate and fear one would expect to be reserved for the monster.

“You know what?” Chris commented as he looked around. “I don’t think they’re happy to see us.”

“Shut up.” Shannon took a sideways swing at his head, which the boy dodged easily.

Shannon turned to the people of Taurus. “We’ll secure your route of escape,” he said evenly. “You should get out of here as fast as you can.”

The townspeople stood in silence for a moment, then everyone began stammering all at once.

“What’s going on?”

“Why would you show up here all of a sudden?”

“Isn’t that boy the kidnapper?!”

Shannon brushed off the comments. “There’s no time for explanations. I don’t know what that monster wants or where it came from, but if you want to escape from here, we can get you out of town.”

The citizens quieted, but couldn’t stop muttering among themselves. None of them made a move to leave.

Shannon opened his mouth, but before he could say anything a voice chimed in from the back of the room.

“Okay—just tell us what to do. Everyone get your things ready.”

Safir Colt emerged holding an old long sword with a practiced grip.

Shannon studied him a moment. "I knew you weren't an ordinary civilian," he murmured.

Safir tapped his sheath lightly and gave a wry smile.

"I'm no fighter. I quit being a mercenary twenty years ago—I just lend my expertise to the citizen's patrol now and then."

"Safir..." A member of the patrol started to voice an objection, but Safir glared at him. The man trailed off into silence.

Safir transferred his glare to the rest of the townspeople. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves," he snapped. "I've never seen a bunch of adults act like such children. Wasting our time, trying to pass the blame around? If you want to stay here and argue, be my guest. I'm going with Shannon."

Nobody seemed willing—or able—to argue with him. The people scurried to gather their belongings. Mothers held their children. An old man staggered and was caught by his son. The members of the citizen's patrol ran back and forth, assisting anyone who needed it.

Suddenly, a low, loud roar shook the room. It was the unmistakable sound of many people speaking in unison, but it was so deep and thunderous that it was as if the world itself were rumbling.

"People of Taurus!" the voice boomed. "All of you, listen carefully!"

Something strange was happening to the creature.

All over the town, countless lumps of various sizes grew all over the tentacles. They swelled up like monstrous pimples, then burst to reveal a new face in each one.

The faces were identical—that of a beautiful man with chiseled features and a dignified air. Despite the grotesque monster from which it had been formed, the faces looked like exquisite works of art. No human face could reach such a level of perfection.

Shannon and Chris stared in utter astonishment. Identical faces of all different sizes stared back.

Pacifica and Raquel climbed off the carriage, their movements slowed by bewilderment. Several townspeople had followed Shannon outside, their mouths agape from shock.

Slowly, the main body of the creature appeared from behind a building. In the middle of the mangled mass of flesh was a much larger face.

Countless lips moved in unison, speaking in a single grave voice.

"In the name of the divine law, I order thee! Destroy the seed of disaster, Pacifica Casull!"

Pacifica's blood went cold. She couldn't believe what the monster had said.

He just told everyone I'm the Scrapped Princess! she thought in a panic.

After everything she and her siblings had done to hide her identity, a multifaceted mountain of flesh had gone and spilled the secret. She felt eyes boring into the back of her neck. She waited for the inevitable reaction— would they scream at her? Throw things? Attack her from behind?

Strangely, she heard nothing from the people of Taurus. She turned back to look at them.

The townspeople's gazes were blank. Chris, Safir, and even Winia all bore the same empty expression.

What? The way the citizens stared sent a chill that ran down Pacifica's spine. She looked to her brother and sister, hoping for an explanation, but she realized in horror that their faces wore the same terrible blankness.

Every pair of empty eyes focused on her.

"Shannon?" Pacifica whispered plaintively. "Raquel? What's going on?"

Pacifica watched, her heart caught in her throat, as her sister's hands reached out for her neck.

"R-Raquel?! Shannon?!"

Beside Raquel, Shannon drew his sword. Safir and Chris pointed their weapons at her. Even Winia reached out.

In an instant, everyone Pacifica cared about—the people who had been kind to her, her friends, and even her brother and sister—had turned into an enemy.

“This is some kind of sick joke,” Pacifica breathed. “Stop it, okay? Come on, this isn’t—”

Raquel’s fingers dug mercilessly into Pacifica’s neck, cutting off her words. Pacifica choked and gripped her sister’s wrists. Shannon raised his sword.

“W-why?” Pacifica gasped.

Pacifica tried to pry her sister’s fingers loose, but she couldn’t even weaken their grip. Raquel’s hands were abnormally strong. There was the chance that she could break Pacifica’s neck before she suffocated. Raquel’s face showed no sign of anger or hatred. She was about to murder her baby sister without having any particular emotion about it.

Pacifica’s eyes started to water.

I’m going to die.

It didn’t bother her that it would be by her siblings’ hands. She had been prepared for that all along—if, as the revelation had said, Pacifica really *was* going to destroy the world, she would accept her own death willingly. And she wanted the brother and sister who had protected her for so long to be the ones to end her life.

But this wasn’t a peaceful suicide after all other options had been exhausted. She couldn’t understand why Shannon and Raquel obeyed the words of a monster. Pacifica would die alone, in the dark, without saying goodbye.

I don’t want it to end like this!

Tears of frustration rolled down Pacifica’s cheeks as her vision began to fade.

No! I don’t want this! Shannon stared blankly at his sister. His feet moved forward on their own volition. He tried

to walk away, tried to trip himself up or drop his sword, but it was no use. His body was no longer his own.

I won't kill Pacifica! he thought.

But from within his mind, a voice from far deeper than his consciousness replied. *You will. You will kill her because you've been ordered to.* The thought smothered his resistance. *You cannot disobey. That is the law. You are a human, and humans cannot rebel.*

No! I won't...

The tiny island of Shannon's consciousness shrieked in defiance, trapped in a body that wouldn't move.

Pacifica saw her brother raise his sword. She tried to scream, but no sound could escape while the hands squeezed her throat.

I don't want to die like this!

Her brother slashed downward.

Not now!

Not here!

Her entire being screamed its denial.

NO!

There was no sound. There was no light.

Something burst forth from Pacifica in an unstoppable wave, an invisible color painting over everyone and everything. It changed everything it touched.

Just before Shannon's blade reached her forehead, it froze. The sword slid out of her brother's hand and clattered to the ground in front of her.

"P-Pacifica...?" Shannon breathed, his sword arm falling limp to his side.

At the same time, Raquel hurriedly pulled her hands from her sister's neck. She stepped back and stared at her fingers as if she'd never seen them before.

The people of Taurus blinked and wiped their eyes. They looked at Pacifica, then the monster, and then each other. It

was obvious that they were clearly confused over what had just happened.

Pacifica touched her bruised neck. Swallowing hard, she hoped that the nightmare was over.

“Are you... back?” Pacifica whispered. “Are you back to normal?”

Shannon barely nodded, his hands shaking. His face contorted in anger. He glared at the monster so violently that it was a wonder the creature didn’t die on the spot.

“Is-is it true?” one of the townspeople managed to stammer. Pacifica saw that everyone’s eyes were trained on her again, although this time they were alive with curiosity, fear, and anger.

“Pacifica Casull, are you really...?” asked the voice.

The human-faced lumps on the monster also turned to her as countless tentacles shot in her direction.

There was nothing to shield everyone with—when Raquel had fallen under the monster’s control, Midgard had been deactivated. Shannon and Safir leapt into action, slashing at every tentacle they could reach, but there were just too many of them. One of the tentacles shot past Shannon’s blade and headed directly for Pacifica’s face.

“Pacifica!” Winia screamed.

There was no time for Pacifica to dodge. She hopelessly covered her head.

Just before the monstrous limb should have slammed into her flesh, the tentacle stopped in midair. The voice spoke again, sounding strangely unsure.

“So it’s true... after all.”

The tentacles actually started to tremble, as though the monster were afraid.

Chris stared in disbelief. “Did it just *stop* itself?” he whispered to Shannon.

Shannon swallowed. “I don’t think so,” he answered. “For some reason, I don’t think it can harm her.”

Pacifica just stared at the halted tentacle, confusion and fear etched on her face.





“Amazing,” came a voice.

From high in the air, a girl gazed down at Taurus. Her sky-colored hair—long enough to reach her feet and tied back with a purple ribbon—waved in the breeze.

She hovered far over the ground. Even with magic, the height dictated that the air was too thin to breathe. The girl should have been suffocating.

She, too, was only human in appearance.

“Impressive for a human to defeat a Peacemaker,” she intoned, “even if it was only an intermediary entity. Impressive that they could disobey divine law.”

If what she had told Shannon was true, the girl’s name was Arfi. Her cold, stiff expression remained unchanged.

“That’s only to be expected from the poison that will destroy the world. She is the last hope our master left behind.”

Arfi nodded in satisfaction. “Still,” she said to no one, “you must destroy the intermediary yourself. Since I have assumed a human form, I cannot lend a hand.”

The monster’s countless faces all stared at Pacifica.

“If we cannot end you directly,” the voices said in unison, “we will destroy those who take your side. Without anyone to protect you, you will not survive.”

Tentacles shot out at Pacifica’s companions. Shannon, Raquel, Chris, and Safir were all trained in combat and could get out of the way, but Winia was frozen in fear. She recognized the tiny human faces at the tips of the tentacles.

The Purgers. The faces showed no pain or sadness, only radiant joy. They seemed to call out to her, promising an end to her own suffering.

Winia screamed and backed away.

That’s not happiness! she thought, her heart racing in her chest. She knew better now. Pain was what drove people to do better, sadness reminded them to be kind. The end of those feelings would be the end of humanity.

The tentacles fused into each other, becoming one thick pillar of flesh. It shot directly for her, but a flash of brown cut across her vision and left half of the tentacle to flop on the ground.

It was a fighting stick, gripped in Chris' hand. He sliced with incredible speed and grace at another incoming tentacle. His exceptional technique clearly allowed the wooden stick to cut like a blade.

"Huh?" Winia breathed. She stared at Chris, more surprised that he had protected her than by his fighting skill.

"Stay inside the building," he told her. "You'll get hurt if you stay out here." Chris crushed the fallen pieces of tentacle with his stick and prepared for the next attack.

"Wall, defend!"

Raquel reinstated the shining geometric pattern of Midgard around the Wild Horse Inn. Satisfied, she peered up at the huge mass of flesh in the hopes that its horror would inspire a plan.

The most difficult thing, she thought, is its rapid powers of regeneration. If both cutting and burning the creature didn't work, she knew a long battle lay ahead.

However, Raquel could see two ways to potentially defeat the monster. The first was to batter it beyond its powers of healing. There had to be some end to its ability to regenerate, so, hypothetically, too many wounds would eventually wear out the monster's powers. The problem with that plan was that it required the town to wait for "eventually."

The second, better option was to quickly destroy all of the creature's body tissue so that it didn't have *time* to use its healing powers. Luckily for everyone, Raquel knew a spell that would do just that.

"I just need another sorcerer," she thought out loud with a sigh.

The complete annihilation attack magic Fenrir, like Ragnarok, was so advanced that it took more than

one sorcerer to activate. Teaming up with Shannon would work, but there was no way she could cast Fenrir and keep her Midgard defenses in place. In addition, the range of Fenrir needed to be set before the spell was cast—it targeted a large area rather than an individual opponent. She needed something to hold the monster in place long enough for her to complete the spell.

That meant she needed Shannon, someone to defend the townspeople in place of Midgard, *and* a plan to keep the creature still.

“You need another sorcerer?” Chris asked from nearby. “Why don’t you ask them?” He gestured at several men who stepped out of the inn.

The men wore ordinary clothes, but Raquel could see their strong builds beneath the outfits. They seemed too fit to be average townspeople.

“This wasn’t part of our mission,” one of them admitted, “but we don’t particularly want to die here. We’ll help you with what you need.”

Shannon bared his teeth. “You!” he hissed. “You’re the ones who—”

Shannon would have leapt forward to attack if Raquel hadn’t pulled him back. He turned to her in frustration, but she simply shook her head.

Regardless of whether or not those men had been the ones to start the rumors or were allied with the soldiers from the road, it wasn’t the time for a feud. “We appreciate it,” Raquel said with a smile.

The fourth Peacemaker, Galil, looked out of the many eyes of the monster.

He had created the mass of flesh to be his intermediary by giving some of his powers to the bodies of the Purgers. He could control the monster like it was his own body, directing its movements and borrowing its senses, or he could cut off all ties with it and dispose of it if he wished.

“Hmm...” Through the creature’s countless eyes, Galil saw Midgard flicker for a moment. Another sorcerer had taken over protecting the inn.

Galil assumed that the Guardian siblings were preparing a different spell; considering the situation, it was most likely an attack spell with severe destructive power. But Galil knew the disadvantages of such spells well.

All he had to do was keep moving. No matter how powerful the spell was, it couldn’t do any harm if it didn’t hit him.

Dark lines suddenly whipped out above the monster. Galil could feel cold metal as the lines touched its skin.

“What is this...?”

They were chains. Men had tossed them back and forth from the rooftops to wrap them around the monster. The men held the ends of the chains and braced themselves, obviously intending to immobilize the creature.

From their movements, Galil could tell that the men were skilled fighters. They were most likely members of the military’s intelligence division.

“Do you think you can restrain me with these?” Galil mocked, although he didn’t speak through the creature. He laughed silently as the humans frantically tried to delay the inevitable.

If they had obeyed the divine law, Galil would have granted them an easy death. Even in terms of simple physical strength, he could defeat any human easily. He could destroy entire cities. The men’s pathetic struggles only prolonged their suffering.

The tentacles wrapped around the chains, preparing to snap them apart. But before it could do so, white-hot lightning passed through the chains and into the monster.

“What?! ”cried Galil.

The attack magic Thunder Hammer hit the creature full force. Had it been an ordinary creature, blood would have boiled from its ears. The intermediary had once been a

living organism, so while its Peacemaker power kept it alive, it still sustained significant injury.

Tentacles charred and fell to the ground.

Galil narrowed his eyes. Moments later, the burned flesh began to grow back. The monster's healing abilities allowed it to reconstruct itself as long as its central core remained intact. Even if it didn't have organic material to replace its ruined parts, it could create new tissue from air, soil, or water.

The only disadvantage was that this reconstructive ability took a tremendous amount of energy.

"Why, you little..."

The lightning strikes continued, one after another. Thunder Hammer was a powerful attack spell, but it only lasted for an instant. Several sorcerers likely took turns activating it.

The healing power was set as the highest priority of the intermediary's abilities, and it activated whenever the creature sustained an injury. The constant attacks meant that the monster was forced to use almost all of its energy on healing and therefore didn't have enough strength left to move.

The way things were going, the monster was likely to die from whatever was cast.

Galil suddenly realized he was panicking.

The Peacemakers were assigned to reign over the Dustovin Continent by Lord Mauser. Even though he was the lowest-ranking Peacemaker, he was still far superior to any human. That was divine law.

Losing a battle to humans could not be tolerated.

"Pacifica Casull... this is all your fault!" Galil screamed.

Humiliated and ashamed, he had no choice but to resort to underhanded tactics.

Shannon began reciting the words to activate his spell. As he looked out at the monster, however, something

made him choke on his words.

A new face emerged in the mass of flesh: that of a young child.

"H-help!" the child cried out weakly, "It... it hurts!"

Shannon's lips ceased the incantation. He could do nothing but stare at the child's face.

It's too late, he tried to remind himself. *You can't save him now*. But as he watched that young face, its tiny features twisting in pain, Shannon felt his heart drop to his stomach.

It was his family's fault. The child hadn't done anything... and yet the presence of the Casull family had killed him anyway. Shannon couldn't bring himself to hurt that child again.

"Sorry, kid."

A short sword flew through the air and right into the child's face. Shocked, Shannon whipped around.

Chris still had his arm extended from his throw. "We can't save you," he said to the looming monster above.

The child's face looked surprised for a moment, but then it collapsed and sank back into the mass of flesh.

Shannon's black eyes turned impossibly darker. "Chris," he hissed dangerously.

"You need to cast your spell," Chris said without batting an eye. "You know he's past saving. The only way to end this is by killing that thing."

Shannon remained silent, his gaze frozen at the younger warrior.

Chris suddenly scowled. "Shannon Casull!" he snapped. "You swore you'd protect her, didn't you? You swore to protect your sister no matter what! You can't afford to hesitate!"

Shannon clenched his fist. Chris kept his gaze level with Shannon's, then looked away and sighed.

"Just do it," Chris said, his voice suddenly tired. "You can't hesitate."

Shannon noticed Raquel watching him from behind. He closed his eyes once, then sent her a small nod.

Shannon evenly recited the end of his spell.

“Release, you are the cane of destruction!”

The complete annihilation attack magic Fenrir activated from Raquel’s hands, its power strengthened by amplification spells.

A sound like an enormous whip cracking shook the air as a giant grid pattern appeared on the ground below the flesh-covered monster. A moment later, countless rays of light shot skyward from the grid. They bent in complicated, overlapping shapes and created a net that completely engulfed the creature.

The chains and tentacles that extended beyond the net were severed; they chinked and splattered to the cobblestones. The beast swung its tentacles at the net of light, but it wouldn’t budge.

A piece of the monster suddenly vanished. It hadn’t been cut or blown off; it simply existed one moment and didn’t the next.

Another moment passed, and another piece of the creature disappeared. It almost looked as if some invisible beast had taken bloodless bites from the monster. The creature tried to escape, swinging its tentacles wildly, but it was no use. With every moment that passed, the monster became smaller and smaller.

It was the force of a molecular disintegration chain reaction, which meant that any matter that was subject to it, disintegrated into particles finer than dust. Growth, healing, and reconstruction were no match for it.

Faces emerged from the dying monster. The Purgers, the Blackhawk soldiers, people from town, and the crying child all burst from the rapidly shrinking mass.

The faces of the dead. They cried out, begging for mercy or shrieking curses.

Shannon bit his lip so hard that a trickle of blood dripped down his chin. Still, he wouldn't look away.

Look at them, he ordered himself. It's your duty to look at them, Shannon.

The monster writhed in pain while the faces screamed. Finally, the glowing cage of light folded in on itself.

A bright light flashed.

The next moment, nothing remained...

Final Chapter

Within twenty-four hours, the town had returned to normal. It was as though the commotion of >the previous day had been nothing but a dream.

Luke Sturm watched the people of Taurus. He was starting to notice the stubbornness and resiliency of everyday life. The townspeople had returned to their daily activities, and he had no doubt the incident would soon be pushed to the back of their minds.

Of course, it was still *in* their minds. He could see fear and hatred in the eyes of the townsfolk as they watched a horse-drawn carriage pass through Taurus' main street.

"Well?" he asked the boy standing beside him.

Chris leaned against the wall of an ordinary building, his eyes closed and his arms crossed. At Luke's question, the tactician looked up.

He furrowed his eyebrows. "Well what, sir?"

Luke turned to him. "Was there anything more you wanted to say?"

"With all due respect, Colonel Sturm. How unlike you to say such a—"

"Nagging, unresolved issues can effect your performance in combat," Luke interrupted. "You still have a long way to go as a fighter."

Chris paused. "You're not going to give me a break, are you?" he asked with a sigh.

Luke turned back to watch the carriage. He decided to say nothing.

After a moment, Chris stretched his arms in the air and grinned. He shook his head. "I'm fine," he assured Luke. "Everything's resolved, as far as I'm concerned."

"If you say so." Luke walked off in the opposite direction of the carriage. Chris jogged up to his side.

"But this is sure to get interesting, don't you think, sir? The Scrapped Princess—"

"Doesn't concern us," Luke said flatly. "All we need to do is plan how to defeat them when our paths cross again. I'm sure it will be soon."

Chris smiled wryly at the colonel. He kept his mouth shut and shrugged.

Pacifica didn't want to look. She knew the carriage was coming up on the town gate, and she knew how damaged the town wall was. She wrung her hands uncomfortably.

Seeing it again will only make me feel worse, she thought.

But a few moments after they presumably passed through the gate, she felt the carriage slow. Shannon hissed at the horses and pulled them to a stop.

Pacifica blinked. "What's the matter?" she asked as she poked her head out the window.

She froze. *Huh?*

Several dozen people surrounded the Casulls' carriage. Pacifica half-expected them to start throwing rocks, but they just looked up at the carriage sadly. She recognized most of the faces—Winia, Safir, even Falk the blacksmith.

Raquel joined Pacifica at the window, then raised her eyebrows.

Winia was the first to step forward. She looked absolutely crushed.





"You're really leaving," she said softly. "Aren't you?"

Pacifica swallowed. She liked Winia, and she hated the idea of leaving Taurus, but she and her siblings didn't have a choice. Winia looked up with pity shining in her eyes. Pacifica had spent the night before tossing and turning from multiple nightmares; Winia had probably heard her.

"I... I'm sorry," Pacifica said quietly. "None of you deserved this. We brought so much trouble to your town."

"But you also saved it." Winia looked away. "And I'll... miss you."

"Shannon," Safir called as he walked up to the carriage. He dropped a large bag beside the younger man.

Shannon frowned, puzzled. "You already gave us a farewell gift."

Safir shook his head. "This isn't from me—it's from everyone here. Preserved foods, medicine..." He smiled. "We figured it could come in handy during your journey."

"I put some bread in there," Michelle called from the crowd. "I'm sure it'll taste better than Kunan's."

"Nonsense!" Kunan retorted. "Our bread is superior in quality! Only high-quality bread will last for your travels."

"I put in replacement hinges for the windows and door of your passenger cabin. The ones you have on now look like they'll need replacing soon, so..." Falk averted his eyes, and his cheeks colored slightly. "I wish I could've made a lot of other things, but that was all I could do on a day's notice. I stayed up all night making them."

Shannon and his sisters exchanged glances, surprised. Pacifica couldn't believe all the kindness they were receiving.

What is all this? she wondered. *We almost destroyed their town!*

"At the very least," Safir said, "those of us here are grateful and want to say goodbye. And don't look so sad," he added, directly at Pacifica. "You should leave with your heads held high."

Pacifica scanned the townspeople who had gathered. Some of them wore sad expressions, others awkwardly shifted their gazes elsewhere. A few offered transparent smiles... clearly the feelings throughout the crowd were varied.

But so were the feelings inside Pacifica. She stared at them, emotion bubbling up from deep inside her, and tried not to cry.

"Th-thank you," she breathed, biting her lip. She climbed out of the carriage and bowed to the crowd. "Thank you all so much!"

Winia drew Pacifica into a long, tight hug. She dipped her lips near Pacifica's ear.

"You still owe me for the inn repairs," she whispered with a hint of humor. "But I'm willing to wait." She pulled Pacifica back and held her at arm's length. Slowly, Winia gave a full, beautiful smile. "I trust you."

Pacifica sniffed and shakily nodded. Winia pulled her in for another hug.

The thin crowd of people was far smaller than the town-wide mob that had openly rejected the Casulls, but Pacifica didn't care how few of them there were. She'd left her own hometown with less of a farewell.

"G-goodbye," Pacifica breathed into Winia's shoulder.

"Goodbye," Winia responded softly. "For now."

Pacifica didn't know where her journey would end. Honestly, she didn't know if she would even survive it. But she still closed her eyes and gripped the back of Winia's blouse.

"For now," she agreed.

END OF VOLUME 2

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